Empowering local self-government

Cooperation between advocacy groups and local governments in Hungary, Poland and Romania

Summary
Introduction to Research

This research is the result of a collaboration between three partner organizations sharing an interest in intersectoral collaborations that strengthen accountability and citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe. ePaństwo Foundation (Poland), Funky Citizens (Romania) and K-Monitor (Hungary) conducted research in their respective countries to explore the experiences and difficulties that advocacy organizations and informal initiatives face when seeking collaboration with local authorities. We aimed to look beyond the institutional understanding of formally established partnerships or alliances and concentrated instead on the self-determining interactions between activists and decision-makers involved in local cooperation. Therefore, we selected cases that cover both compromise and conflict as equally relevant strategies for the parties involved, and disregarded out-contracted public services, one-time collaborations or externally determined contractual frameworks. The research report consists of one horizontal chapter that generalizes the findings and three country chapters with four case studies each. Between May and July 2020, we conducted 64 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives from 35 organizations in 35 different local entities, involving both activists and local government officials.

Our main ambition was to learn about the narratives used by our informants to describe their efforts to transcend the difficulties of their local political contexts, especially regarding conflict-of-interest situations and their dilemmas about the roles they play and the political claims they make. This is particularly relevant in present-day Central and Eastern Europe, where the widely shared perception of democratic backsliding and the closing civic space in national-level politics have triggered a change in the attitude and the toolkit of local civil society. Seeking collaboration with local partners amidst political tensions is about rediscovering the power of acting in concert and institutionalizing distrust to enable trust. Establishing a collaborative democratic scene away from party politics has the potential to transform both its participants and the community at large. As a result of globalization on the one hand and centralization on the other, local governments have become more and more overloaded by social and economic tensions. It cannot be denied that in most contexts, this has resulted in the suppression rather than the flourishing of local democracy. Still, by looking at the strategies with which local civic actors approach such (often unlikely) collaborations with local authorities, we can learn a lot about the power of civility to prevent isolation and political antagonism, to stand up against the systemic restraints to democratic dialog and to contribute to empowered local self-government.

While the professionalization of these interactions has strengthened the institutional capacities of local civil society actors, it has also brought them under tighter regulation and control. Partnerships around broadly consensual policy goals have become the conventional form of the state-civil society relationship, thereby facilitating the outsourcing of public tasks and the provision of public services to civil society organizations. By means of such quasi-private, often informal contracts, civil society and local governments share their resources as formally equal parties to achieve common goals. But such partnerships, promulgated by developmental programs, are increasingly being perceived as a form of political co-optation, whereby social actors have no power and publicity to make claims about the democratic legitimacy and the justification of the political process. The apolitical nature of this type of cooperation has pushed many civic initiatives toward non-risky activities, instead of targeting systemic shortcomings. Less established stakeholder relationships were widely regarded as ill-equipped for cooperation and have therefore been ignored.

In our interviews, this partnership rhetoric served as a negative point of reference in relation to which the informants criticized the democratic shortcomings of their local contexts. Since the 2010s, many activist groups have tried to strategically move away from excessive reliance on local government partnerships and towards building local embeddedness to make their operations more independent from partnership contracts. This trend is closely linked to a renewed interest in local issues and urban activism and the use of civic techniques such as citizen journalism, community organizing, public information requests and other kinds of watchdog activities all around the region. This new localism has also triggered a more open approach on the part of local authorities to legitimize themselves via fashionable digital tools and more opportunities for consultation and public participation.

Contrary to the one-sided emphasis on the financial terms in CSO-municipal partnerships, our analysis documents a growing interest in the democratic role of local collaborations in improving local civic ecosystems. Activists exert influence on local politics by the interconnected practices of participation, representation and deliberation. Participation as a realm brought about through civil society, and the neutral and self-evident realm of representation through the electoral process, are often described as mutually exclusive logics. By contrast, we have found that the processes of creating new ways of citizen participation and emphasizing the lack of democratic values in political representation interpenetrate each other. By making political claims while tackling concrete local problems, activists can meaningfully connect abstract principles to the deficient social and political conditions of their local context. This process of making representative claims is of crucial importance, since it enables local actors to elaborate on local policies beyond appealing to the goodwill of politicians. Committed to the common good, civic society organizations and local authorities thus work to co-create hybrid institutions

that empower local community efforts. While this changes the modus operandi of local governments from "command and control" to "facilitate and support," it also means that local actors become interdependent. As one of our Polish interviewees noted, if there is no local government, there won't be any cooperation at all.

In Hungary, the spread of civil society during the 1990s was followed by an imperfect institutionalization of local collaborative practices where CSOs were brought under economic and political control. The discourse on partnership was largely steered by the 'Westernization' of civil society as Hungary gained EU membership. Bureaucratic management and project-based funding, leaving little room to question the status quo, often overshadowed civic strategies during the 2000s. After the zenith of the partnership model, Hungarian civil society needed to modify its tactics, also due to the political changes in 2010. The Orbán government has exerted power over the sector through recentralization, creating an ever more shrinking civic space. CSOs reacted to the hostile environment by nurturing new alliances and better local embeddedness, thus becoming relevant players in local politics. After the 2019 municipal elections, victorious opposition politicians promised a better inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes. However, systemic change does not come all at once. Activists are now struggling to change the local authorities' fixed technocratic attitude and lack of a culture of collaboration, which undermines the commitment of the newly elected leaders.

The Polish part of the report tries to identify the most important challenges and preconditions for the implementation of successful cooperation. The chapter focuses on CSOs that support transparency, promote open data, and enhance social participation. The case studies describe four possible patterns of collaboration between local governments and NGOs. First, NGOs can decide to work for the municipality and collaborate with it from the inside. Secondly, NGOs can act as the political opposition and try to collaborate with the local government as political actors. Thirdly, established organizations can decide to move their activities elsewhere after several failed attempts at collaboration with the local government. And finally, CSOs can influence and exert pressure on local governments as watchdogs and whistleblowers.

In Romania, the modernization pressure on local authorities was particularly high, which is why internal reforms in progressive municipalities have become the main driver shaping the forms of collaboration with civic society. The idea and the slogan of participatory governance have gained ground in recent years. While this may bring positive results in terms of efficiency (see the case study about city managers in Romania), it often does not harbor any true democratic potential. Participatory mechanisms that are initiated from the top down face serious difficulties in mobilizing and empowering local civil society. Yet local administrations often seek such partnerships with social actors, while local initiatives tend to lack the proper narratives and necessary resources to make claims vis-à-vis local decision-making bodies that are overly technocratic, bureaucratic, or simply too distant and detached from the people on the ground. CSOs in Romania thus tend to invest their efforts elsewhere, and they have been especially visible during critical events in national politics that resulted in large-scale public demonstrations.

Horizontal study

Introduction

Background of the study

The relationship between local governments and civic organizations has always been a dynamic one, and it has witnessed several challenges in recent years. This is particularly true for local organizations and informal initiatives that seeking collaboration with the authorities, but at the same time adopt a confrontational strategy in their advocacy and interest representation activities. The present study provides an overview of cooperation between civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in significant advocacy activities on the one hand and local governments in the Central East European region on the other. This report has been prepared by three partner organizations, one from each of the three countries, that share an interest in NGO-municipal collaborations, anti-corruption and community participation. K-Monitor (Hungary), ePanstwo Foundation (Poland) and Funky Citizens (Romania) conducted research in their respective countries and explored the experiences and difficulties of local partnerships. It is based on 64 interviews with representatives from 35 organizations in 35 different local entities (cities, towns or districts).

The **aim of the research** is to support bottom-up democratic reform by sharing experiences of self-organizing communities, to ensure oversight of local governance and to increase the capacity for developing democratic processes at the local level through collaborative practices of reform. The study was ultimately driven by the aim of fostering experiments in NGO-municipal cooperation, and of providing valuable insights into existing processes of trial and error in public participation, advocacy and civic technology innovation. Based on the results of this study, the CSOs involved will prepare recommendations and advocacy guidelines for local actors. To support bottom-up democratic reform, self-organizing communities must be strengthened – not only to ensure civil society oversight of political forces and to anchor democratic practices at the local level, but also to improve the quality of local governance, contribute to the emergence of the next generation of activists and politicians, and broaden this primary entry point for political participation and representation.

Methodology

Rooted in our shared vision of a democratic future, where civic advocacy is an explicit component of the political process, we jointly elaborated a **definition of cooperation between local government and civil society.** Our goal was to map the most innovative cases of civic-municipal cooperation, with terms and conditions reflect the autonomous interaction of the parties involved, a process in which consensus and conflict are in dynamic tension. Therefore, we decided to narrow the scope of analysis to the topics of transparency, anti-corruption, citizen monitoring of public services, participatory urban planning, participatory budgeting, community involvement programs, civic technology collaboration, and – as a general principle – to any institutionalized, long-standing cooperation between local governments and citizens or NGOs in which actual power is shared with or delegated to social actors in the course of the policy cycle. We were looking for collaborations that are both substantial partnerships and lasting relationships, but we excluded cases of out-contracted public services, one-time collaborations or externally determined frameworks such as EU grants.

Based on the above description, the **selection of cases** took place through an iterative process of exploring existing practices in each country, starting with desk research of the fragmented landscape of such collaboration. We concentrated on settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants, where collaborative relations are more formalized and less dependent on interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, we also sought to include more peripheral cases that usually receive less media coverage. We used a snowball sampling method to reach out to relevant interviewees, focusing on collaborations that happened in the past five years. Instead of aiming for an all-encompassing overview of the whole spectrum of cases or a macro-level analysis reflecting the experiences of the majority of actors involved in collaborative practices, our aim was to arrive at a more profound understanding of the narratives that our informants use when they confront the recurring problems of local-level politics. The focus on their efforts to transcend the difficulties of their respective contexts helps to foster our understanding of how problems are perceived in these collaborations, especially regarding conflict-of-interest situations and role dilemmas. Further, the research sought to uncover how interviewees express themselves about topics such as democracy, sustainability, participatory governance, policy making, community building, advocacy or democratic deficits. Thus, instead of conducting research on innovative practitioners, we as researchers – but also as activists – aimed to engage in a dialog with them to test our normative assumptions about citizen participation.

After the preliminary desk research to map relevant examples of NGO-municipal collaboration, we followed a qualitative approach using **semi-structured in-depth interviews.** In order to be able to create guidelines for advocacy campaigns and improve local governance mechanisms, the interviews covered various issues. Overall, three main topics were discussed. First, we addressed general issues such as the history of the organization, the interviewees' understanding of their field and network, and their motivation to pursue collaborative

practices. Secondly, we explored the details of collaboration: how it came about, who initiated it, and how the dynamic changed over time. Thirdly, the interviewees were asked about the challenges they face and how they might be overcome. Between May and July 2020, we conducted around 20 interviews in each country (64 in total) with key experts, local government representatives and civil society activists, which have been transcribed for further analysis.

Local governance under pressure

Same questions, different contexts

Local governments and civil society organizations doing advocacy work on local issues are unlikely friends. Having examined dozens of collaborations between them, it would be misleading to place too much emphasis on interpreting interpersonal elements as a form of friendship. Behind the human components of such relationships there are systemic-structural contradictions and risks that originate at the local, national and global level. To provide stable institutional solutions for mitigating and managing external threats, trust needs to be developed and nourished among local players. But it is equally important to channel distrust and civil discontent into an open dialog based on a shared description of reality. Emanating from peculiar social and political circumstances and taking shape between actors marked by **very different logics of operation and cultural attitudes,** these collaborations often do not presuppose anything like friendship or mutual sympathy. Working in the shared sphere of a local community, encountering each other as unavoidable peers, decision makers and activists are faced with having to harmonize their diverging interests and value orientations in order to create something common that goes beyond their respective domains. Cooperation and conflict are not two opposing modalities that either produce a positive or a negative relationship. Instead, their interplay creates a singular "other scene" that has the potential to transform its participants and the community at large.

Democratic backsliding, which has characterized the recent history of post-socialist countries, creates an even more peculiar context for NGO-municipal cooperation at the local level. Although government policies against civil society organizations in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe have become an inseparable part of the region's autocratization processes,[1] anti-NGO campaigns antagonizing critical initiatives are not directly relevant in local contexts. However, most of our interviewees referenced systemic changes that have led to a **closing space for civil society.** Financial cuts and arbitrary funding decisions, smear campaigns and dirigiste (top-down) policies leading to political dependency are increasingly making themselves felt at the local level. Civil society organizations thus struggle to expand their activities, to develop new partnerships and to reach a broader audience with their work. Facing centralized and clientelist power structures that demand at least passive political loyalty, civil society is increasingly deprived of the substance of its functional autonomy. State-controlled media, or the municipal media at the local level, does not provide the necessary publicity for civil initiatives. This limits the abilities of CSOs to shape the political agenda, seek recognition for the problems they perceive and influence the decision-making process at an early stage. The involvement of non-governmental actors is often determined by the power holders, which creates the illusion of an all-mighty paternalist political monopoly that is using its social constituency to legitimize the status quo. Such measures contributing to a shrinking local civic space are an everyday experience for citizens and activists alike, albeit to varying degrees in different countries.

The **role of local governments** also differs in the three countries.[2] The rampant influence of the central government in Hungary, likely to be strengthened by ongoing centralization efforts, shifts power from the local to the national level. In Hungary, local government is fragmented and exists in a state of symbiosis with a narrow, depoliticized segment of civil society that is at constant risk of being coopted by it. In general, cooperation between CSOs and local authorities has declined in recent years, but in certain areas where local governments face serious challenges, innovative collaborations have reemerged. Since the Hungarian authorities at the national level are unresponsive, local governments are seen by many as a counterbalance to the national democratic decline. In Poland, most CSOs receive some funding from municipal governments, encompassing a vast array of programs in different areas, most commonly in sports, education, culture and social services. Informal grassroots organizations and urban movements have emerged as challengers to political incumbents and represent different local networks and policy agendas. In Romania, EU funds are often distributed through local government authorities, which has contributed to a shift toward a technocratic approach to urban governance. However, this has not resulted in a greater significance of local initiatives. Accordingly, local governments are often perceived as the more important actors, shaping the environment for CSOs and dominating the field of civic engagement. According to comprehensive research conducted by the Erste Stiftung, CSOs have a slightly positive opinion on the role of local governments in their operations in Hungary and Poland, comparable to the impact of the media and of corporations. In Romania, CSOs see local governments as equally influential as the national government, but they also have a more neutral stance toward them.

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1 https://visegradinsight.eu/closing-spaces-for-civil-society-a-multidimensional-game/
2 http://www.erstestiftung.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/civil_society_studie_issuu_e1.pdf

Unlike the large share of civic society that sees funding from local government as a lifeline, the local advocacy groups involved in this research pursue a more independent approach toward local authorities. But unlike highly professional national-level NGOs that are able to secure funding and other non-material resources such as access to the media and partnerships with international networks, these organizations are struggling to **find a balance between local embeddedness and functional autonomy** and to avoid social and political isolation. If the partnerships with local governments, the media and the business sector break down, the impact of civil society engagement significantly diminishes. To better understand the causes of this situation, we present a brief historical overview before outlining the general patterns observed in the strategic interplays of collaborative local practices in greater detail. Finally, we scrutinize the conditions that either facilitate or hamper cooperation, and their potential role in a participative turn within a given local civic ecosystem. To put this into more practical terms, we also highlight some policy-level factors that our interviewees frequently mentioned as keys to substantive collaboration.

	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Population (2020)	9.77 million	37.97 million	19.41 million
GDP per capita PPP (in U.S. $) (2019)[3]	34,046	33,891	27,998
Percentage of internet users (2020)[4]	88.9%	78.6%	74.8%
Number of CSOs[5]	81,000 CSOs, 64,000 of which are active	117,000 CSOs, 80,000 of which are active	62,600 CSOs, 26,000 of which are active
Percentage of the population that actively participates in civil society (2015)[6]	4.7%	7.3%	3.6%
Percentage of the population that agrees that the work of NGOs is important for the functioning of a democratic society (2019)	84%	85%	62%
Number of local governments at town/municipality level	3,155 municipalities (among them 23 towns with county rights) + the 23 districts of Budapest (two-tiered system)	2,477 municipalities (302 urban communes, including 66 cities with poviat (county) rights, 642 urban-rural and 1,533 rural communes)	103 municipalities, 217 other cities (for urban areas), and 2,861 communes (for rural areas)
Average population per local government entity[7] (median population[8])	3,072 (815)	15,322 (7,540)	6,152 (3,110)
Participation in the last local elections	48.58% (2019)	54.90% (first round), 48.83% (second round) (2018)	48.4% (2016)
Subnational government expenditure (% of GDP)	6.3%	13.3%	8.7%
Percentage of the population that tends to have trust in regional or local public authorities (2019)[9]	57.1 %	53.2 %	46.08 %

The regime change period: speaking truth to power

In post-socialist countries, citizens doing advocacy work are often seen, in both a positive and negative sense, as the successors of former dissidents. In his political essay "The Power of the Powerless" written in 1978, the Czech playwright, dissident and later politician Václav Havel depicts how the very nature of communist regimes can make dissidents of ordinary citizens. By "living in truth" in their daily lives, they automatically differentiate themselves from the officially mandated culture prescribed by the state, since power is only effective inasmuch as citizens are willing to submit to it. While the pre-1989 regimes were characterized by a subsumption of society by the state, social dissidence gave birth to a second society, a parallel polis of citizens. Speaking truth to power was a non-violent political tactic, employed by dissidents against the propaganda of oppressive governments. The always unsettling energy of speaking truth to power despite the possible negative consequences was the core of the identity of dissident civil society, confronting institutionalized power in an anti-political fashion.

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3 International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (October - 2019)
4 https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm
5 Erste report, p. 20-21
6 EUSTAT 2015
7 EUPACK 2016
8 OECD, 2016
9 EUROBAROMETER, 2019

But **after the regime change**, this intellectual strategy offered very little guidance for the behavior and strategies of actors participating in civic initiatives in these newborn democracies, except in terms of an undeniable amount of moral capital. This legacy is a heavy burden on the shoulders of critical activists, who are often denounced by their opponents as either shouting from the sidelines of normal democratic politics or as assuming a superior position to high-handedly proclaim what democracy is about. During the decades of heated political debates following the transition period, the emancipatory value resulting from the fact that dissidents remained independent from the state evaporated. Speaking truth to power from a position of splendid isolation outside politics was particularly incompatible with the deeply interconnected sphere of local politics, where it was difficult to say what being "below" or "outside of power" meant, when creating a democratic environment was an undertaking that needed the active involvement of each and every one. The reason for this was that the regime change brought about a local government reform that replaced the Soviet-style system of councils, which had a highly centralized administrative and bureaucratic structure.

Civic involvement in this transformation was not the abnegation of the **dissident legacy**, but rather the preservation of civic values like non-violence, self-organization, civility and plurality into the democratic era, and the invention of proper institutions that would perform these core values. The respective traditions of the Polish Solidarity movement and the Hungarian democratic opposition were particularly influential, while in post-totalitarian Romania, the civic patterns lacked such a tradition and the post-1989 processes and waves of protest thus had more autochthonous results. But in the midst of the economic and social crisis of the 1990s, the dissident legacy either faded away, was instrumentalized by politics or turned to professionalized initiatives that pursued their goals through formal and informal channels. While this first, post-transition phase of post-socialist civil society was impressive in terms of its size and diversity, its influence on policy-making has remained limited due to structural weaknesses.

The turn of the millennium: partnership or cooptation?

Many interviewees described the 2000s as a period of **professionalization**. This inevitable development coincided with administrative attempts to bring civil society under tighter regulation and control. The history of functional differentiation between the state and civil society has left its mark on what we call the civic space today. The imperfect autonomy it created went hand in hand with a blurring of the boundaries between the civic and the public spheres, which later impaired the independent voice and critical stance of civil society. This was due to the fact that the key driver in this process was international and state funding that directed CSOs toward "non-risky" activities (sports, leisure, cultural and social services) by **outsourcing public tasks** and contracting out the provision of services that the state was unable or unwilling to perform. This established a one-sided autonomy, guaranteed by contracts with the local government. Unlike real partnerships, these arrangements created dependency and emphasized the financial terms of the NGO-municipal relationships. These contracts were quasi-private, often informal, with no public claims to broader democratic legitimacy or justification. These collaborations sometimes became **hotbeds for cooptation** or even acted as legal loopholes to avoid bureaucratic regulations, for example by using associations and GONGOs,[10] which led to corrupt practices that further reduced the transparency of fund distribution. For organizations within these privileged arrangements, partnership meant dependency but also safeguards for future operation.

This elaboration of NGO-municipal relations rarely happened in the public eye. Public deliberation was substituted by an almost consensual **"creed of civil partnership"** that was utilized by the political elite. The rhetoric of partnership – steered by European institutions during the accession process as the preeminent form of state-civil relationships – took the rights and responsibilities of civic partners as self-evident. If partnership is understood as a contractual collaboration agreement between formally equal parties, less structured or established stakeholder relationships will inevitably be regarded as unequipped for cooperation. As a result, civic strategies and activities for exerting influence on the decision-making process that differed from these established partnerships were crowded out.

Local politics often used forced or fake involvement of actors from civil society to legitimize political aims, while formal institutions rarely served as actual places of democratic dialog. The autonomy of CSOs (or any kind of stakeholder) was acknowledged mostly in terms of their functional role, the effectiveness and appropriateness of the programs they implemented and the services they delivered. This caused fragmentation within local civil spheres, without any institutional mediation. Incorporated actors grew silent about local events, while actors in liminal positions were in constant tension between a value-oriented civic logic on the one hand and functional effectiveness on the other. With rapid globalization and marketization, local governments became **conflict containers**, overloaded by tensions originating from the upper levels, exacerbated by fiscal crises and further seclusion. The lack of real cooperative opportunities within partnerships for tackling new challenges and the narrowness of the field when it came to articulating democratic demands through deliberate dialog turned local initiatives toward NIMBY activism[11] and the avoidance of conflictual positions. In this risk-averse environment, any deviation from the politics of business as usual was hard to justify.

Many of our interviewees from civil society described local politics as **little kingdoms in the city hall**, isolated from their citizens as a result of impenetrable bureaucratic structures (see especially Bucharest, Romania). In the absence of civic traditions and positive social capital, society often organizes itself along mafia-style patron-client systems. At the same time, in milieus exposed to modernization

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10   Government-organized non-governmental organizations
11   The term NIMBY (an acronym for the phrase "not in my back yard") characterizes the opposition of residents to proposed developments in their local area.

pressure, new public management techniques and public-private partnerships appeared. Here, the **slogan of participatory governance** gained ground, often by bringing civic competencies in-house. But just as in "neo-feudal" contexts, where the mayor is the one who knows best, the framework of **neo-liberal governance** also gives a supreme position to technocratic managers who, in the name of effectiveness and modernization, pursue policy reform that cannot be questioned. While better coordination between the sectors and branches of local administrations may bring positive results (see the case study about city managers in Romania), it does not harbor any true democratic potential. This is due to the fact that the engagement of local stakeholders is hampered by a weak and domesticated civil society. New partnerships initiated by local governments in the 2000s with powerful local actors differed substantially from conventional participation models prescribed by legislation (such as public hearings), but they involved citizens only as a target group, and rarely included disadvantaged groups.

Thus, **civic activism decoupled from official partnerships** reappeared in the 2010s – to some extent as a reaction to the criticism outlined above – as expressions of solidarity and grassroot embeddedness, trying to transcend the distrustful and individualist attitudes, learned helplessness and scapegoating that contributed to the rigid roles of rulers and ruled in local politics. Although different norms and habituses continue to exist in parallel, this new stance toward civic engagement has proved to be more effective in tackling the problem of the weakness of interest articulation and advocacy. Such activists distinguish themselves from old-school civil society organizations, but their attitude is also different from people involved in social movements who tend to institutionalize their activity and strive for broader social change. New civic attitudes resulted in new forms of cooperation between local initiatives and municipalities that are less focused on institutionalized politics and resources but instead aim to act collectively to strengthen the community and build solidarity by exercising local self-government.

New localism: finding alternative forms of cooperation

Following the crisis-ridden period after 2008, not only a new generation of urban movements and activists appeared on the local scene, but a reappreciation of local issues and commons (from public services to culture and identity) also took place. This **new localism** brought back into focus the decision-making processes of local governments, by calling decision makers to account through social media, citizen journalism, public information requests and other kinds of watchdog activities. Many local decision makers also realized that it is in their basic interest to empower local politics to make decisions of better quality and greater legitimacy and – in the face of budget cuts and centralization efforts – to strengthen their position in multi-level governance frameworks. Instead of ignoring citizens' input as disturbing interference, local governments appear more and more open toward **public engagement**. To some extent, this was also a result of the switch of EU policies from the regional to the urban level. As cities were turning into major targets of investment and catalysts for economic growth, they also needed to find allies for large-scale urban development and new ways of legitimizing urban interventions. Digitalization is another important driver for involving local citizens in determining and controlling the public services they need and consume on a daily basis. Today, cities cannot tackle social problems and economic imperatives without the involvement and participation of non-state actors. But the growth of the audience and of the consumer democracy in bigger cities, mediated through digital tools, often turned into mere political campaigning to manufacture political consent. Top-down participative restructuring proved unsatisfying in almost every context, where the social forces of new localism became vocal and critical either through conscious community-organizing efforts or through the spontaneous eruption of protests.

There is a characteristic pattern to the political contexts behind most of the successful collaborations that we examined in our research. It starts with grassroot social mobilization, very often around trivial demands, without any clear political dimension. Ambitions to achieve policy change require a **political window of opportunity.** This can be a political vacuum or a change in power, where new actors with an organic vision of and personal affiliation with public participation open the floor for change. However, these are preconditions for but not the decisive factors in progressive democratic reforms carried out by NGO-municipal cooperation. Intensifying and restructuring participatory mechanisms in a collaborative manner and ensuring that they are based on the equal terms of a substantive partnership is a long and exhausting process. Despite the best intentions, conflicts and dead-ends are part and parcel of building collaboration. Rapid delivery of positive outcomes often comes at the expense of democratic deliberation, which is only exacerbated by the erratic goodwill of those in power. Intensive cooperation, however, creates its own underpinnings by mobilizing the power of collective intelligence, turning conventional bureaucratic procedures into a **discovery process**. Public participation is not an end in itself, but a learning process that can help to identify new allies and possibilities by transcending the petrified roles of rulers and ruled. But the real peculiarity of civic-municipal cooperation lies in the fact that in addition to serving as a true creative laboratory for democracy, it also compels participants to create sustainable institutional solutions in line with the behavioral patterns of the community.

This discovery process often yields outcomes that can also prevail in contexts other than the original field of cooperation. Public engagement is inherently tied to the general life of the local community, since a shared interest in public affairs presupposes certain preconditions of acting together (e.g. the rebuilding of micro-communities, a strong local identity, mutual solidarity). Civil society organizations participating in collaborative practices with local governments are also agents advocating for a stronger and more active community, while the local administration is responsible for **demarcating the boundary between local public affairs and particular demands** that are beyond the control of the local government. In a social context marked by new localism, digitalization, post-materialism as well as an unbalanced relationship between the state, the market and local societies, these boundaries are constantly being renegotiated. As public participation is becoming fashionable, it is more important than ever to differentiate between real participation that expands the physical

and discursive spaces where people can meet and practice their citizenship collectively, and **bogus participation** that opens only a narrow field to public engagement, while keeping it strictly separated from the "core activities" of the public administration. The strategic dilemmas described by our informants can be seen in the light of such contentions, as they strive to effectively activate the democratic potential of participatory and collaborative practices and to find their functional role in local governance.

Reclaiming the civic space

Making representative claims

The relationship between the political and the civil sphere is often described as a dichotomy between participation as a realm brought about through civil society, and government as a realm of representation. Taking a closer look at the cases presented in this study, instead of two mutually exclusive logics we have found that **participation and representation interpenetrate each other** beyond sectoral boundaries. While local governments play an active role in instituting public participation, civil society organizations are part of the multi-level representative field. Acting as a member of civil society is also participation in the discursive field where claims are made of representation and legitimacy. Seeing the acts of CSOs as representative claims[12] thus shifts the attention from civil society as an intermediary realm of interest articulation and aggregation to one of activated citizenship as a creative act, where social constituency is a moving target. The "representative claim" framework developed by Michael Saward sees representation as a dynamic interaction between a wide range of representatives (including CSOs) and those they claim to represent, instead of a static institutional fact resulting from the principal-agent relationship between voters and politicians. All kinds of actors, elected and unelected, make claims to represent certain constituencies. Therefore, the role of non-elected actors such as CSOs can be understood as being broader than simply that of audience or spokesperson striving to be represented in the formal political process. Instead, CSOs are actively making claims about themselves as representatives in well-defined cases (e.g. clients or marginalized groups) and have a strong say on the whole representational process by claiming certain practices to be legitimate or illegitimate (e.g. by declaring that the results of an official consultation process are discredited due to a lack of transparency).

Through institutional and non-institutional politics beyond elections, civil society can effectively exert influence on local governments by claiming the authority of universal norms "from above" (be it human rights, policy goals about climate change or issues from the agenda of national politics). More importantly, they can combine these norms "from above" with the authority of speaking for people "from below" governments (either by their own embeddedness or by creating alliances). The **"sandwich strategy"**[13] of representative claims that can authentically link "above" and "below" provides an effective symbolic-discursive construction for local CSOs, while the one-sided function of humanitarian representative, acting only as a moral compass that speaks truth to power from above, can easily prove to be deficient in local politics. In the context of rising populism, the explicit articulation of these alternative claims is particularly important, since the field of representation is increasingly emptied out by populists claiming to be the only true representative of the people, while at the same time arguing that citizens are weak and impotent without a strong leader.

Representation as a tool: from participation to deliberation

While **making a representative claim** is important, this does not mean that a local CSO has to declare itself to be a replacement for the mayor and the municipal council. CSOs make claims about the aptitude or capacity of a would-be representative and about the relevant characteristics of the social audience, even without a mass political movement or plentiful resources behind them. Political actors at the local level usually have more resources at their disposal, but they are less well-equipped when it comes to the resources that are important for public participation (social capital, volunteers, etc.). In making a claim, a certain degree of tension with the local government is a constant possibility, but instead of an antagonistic stance toward politics, civic organizations are more likely to negotiate their claim and secure recognition for their activity. While local governments can legitimately call into question civic representative claims when they are too vague, they cannot arbitrarily decide on the membership in civil society. Discursive efforts to create functional differentiation between local politics and civil society need to be anchored in public institutions (consultative bodies, funding policies, local regulations, etc.). **Colonizing efforts** to undermine the inner logic of the other sphere need to be kept at bay. Universal values and the autonomy of civil society should not be swept aside for the sake of efficiency and the concentration of power. Similarly, the formalistic ideals of the state bureaucracy (giving each person equal consideration) and of electoral politics (one person, one vote), which mediate between partial interests in the name of the public good, have to be respected. While the local government has to compensate for the structural inequality of membership in organized civil society, the latter also has a role in overseeing the impartial nature of political processes. This strengthens the legitimacy of decision making and invests critical actors with responsibilities.

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12   See Saward, Michael (2006). The Representative Claim. Contemporary Political Theory, 5(3) pp. 297–318.
13   The term was invented by Jonathan Fox, see: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dfce/7e8afa6cd54b8165e45e574f42ef70883d09.pdf

In the cases we reviewed, civic representative claims differ in terms of the connection between participation and representation and in their political relevance. When a CSO sets up an IT platform where citizens can report problems to their local municipality (see the case study "Járókelő – Hungary"), this activity can be translated into a representative claim about average citizens demanding greater digitalization and a more effective administration – a claim that reaches a larger audience than the actual number of users of the platform. Sometimes, those who are represented are directly involved in advocacy activities as clients (e.g. a marginalized group in the case of the community foundations, or of ULE in Hungary), while a CSO can represent a not-yet-existing group of potential users of a certain facility when it submits a project for funding to the local participatory budgeting process. Mission statements and strategic narratives of CSOs that are interpreted as representative claims always imply normative demands about citizens' involvement and what the process of representation should look like. This is why top-down technocratic governance techniques often lack democratic potential despite their participatory practices. They leave no room for claim-making about the process of representation or its shortcomings, or the improvement of social factors that make democracy work. Thus representation – often through participatory or electoral schemes – is generated in a seemingly neutral and self-evident fashion, thereby providing information for decision makers "on demand."

As a general rule, however, **informal channels** for interest representation are available. Yet the lack of publicity makes claim-making ineffective, since informal negotiations only allow for micro-level interventions, for instance by acting as a spokesperson for a particular group of residents. The force field in which civil society actually comes into existence is generated by continuous mutual reactions within the public discourse. With no such dialog around claims and participatory practices, there is less autonomy and independence for CSOs, and more arbitrary power of decision makers to coopt and, by using local media, hand-pick **"worthies" as spokespersons**. Local governments make constant efforts to formalize the channels of interest mediation by transforming them into quasi-private contracts controlled by bureaucratic rules, which allows them to mechanically aggregate social interests and express inherent identities instead of engaging in the process of competing representative claims. This poses a risk for civic advocacy and compromises its capacity for substantive partnerships. This deficiency can only be addressed through discursive embeddedness in a public debate that has the potential to appeal to the whole community of citizens.

To sum up, the key to collaborations that push back against the shrinking civic space lies in three interrelated elements: **participation, representation and deliberation**. First, CSOs play the functional role of creating ways to offer and facilitate effective participation. Then, they have to make a representative claim by linking this activity to universal values, in order to successfully articulate the transformative nature of their work. Lastly, these claims need to be activated through deliberative discourse by actively calling out the deficiencies of the public sphere. This second level of civic practice involves continuous communicative exchanges between the representatives and the represented, which establishes a new norm and a particular form of local culture within the public sphere. Generally, CSOs do not possess any irreplaceable resources or expert knowledge that would make them a valuable partner for the local authorities. This is why it is necessary to carefully craft a representative claim. In their advocacy efforts, local CSOs not only help citizens to participate actively, but – by putting at work their claims in the public sphere – they **experiment with a vast array of democratic practices**[14] to ground politics in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship of deliberation. This creates a second, systemic layer of political representation beyond appealing to the goodwill of council members and the mayor as representatives. If we see CSOs as contributing not only to the mobilization of social input into decision making, but also to the further development of democracy through representation and deliberation, we get a more complex picture of their functions and perspectives, and of how they become part and parcel of local politics.

Enhancing local civic ecosystems

Local governance in Central-Eastern Europe is at a crossroads. It will either lose its relevance or evolve into a pocket of democracy that actively invests in civic ecosystems to support a democratic renewal. A participatory version of the former scenario, based on the responsibilization of citizens, who thus take part in austerity decisions and the rolling back of public services out of self-interest, is a worrisome possibility. Low-intensity politics – the maintenance of a facade of self-governance that conceals a coopted civil society – is a lived reality in many communities in our region. Such environments are incapable of accommodating alternative representative claims, and thus often lead to conflict. The political or economic success of a city sometimes also works against inclusive operation, while in contexts where political representation is fragile, and the real decisions are made outside of representative organs, public engagement is less prevalent. At the same time, local governments are under increasing pressure, which gives civil society and local governments a chance to recognize their shared interests in deepening democratic governance. By understanding these systemic effects and the constraints within which municipalities have to operate, civic actors are in a better position to **create hooks for committing the local administration and leadership** to engage in cooperation, instead of remaining stuck in distrust and hostility. The key to unlock the potential of such collaborations is to create enabling conditions not only for a few privileged actors, but for the whole civic ecosystem.

Beyond better responses to social and environmental challenges, the collaborations included in this study have enhanced CSOs' **awareness of the difficult decisions** made by the local authorities and, to a greater or lesser extent, created a new setting for public dialog. Mutual understanding between the cooperating parties has enabled a better understanding of policy dilemmas on the part of

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14   For example, by organizing public debates, petition campaigns and consultations, conducting surveys, collecting data, engaging in public information out-
     reach (newsletters), community visioning, study circles, etc.

citizens and more effective deal-making and brokerage between competing stakeholder interests. Civil society organizations operate at the interface between the state, citizens and the market. Owing to their independent position and their embeddedness in society, they can represent and reconcile the interests of a wide range of actors, including marginalized groups. It is also important to note that local collaborations with civil society play an important role in **creating coherence between local and global policy agendas**. CSOs advocate for these norms and policies, but they are often also able to mobilize expertise and resources that can supplement the limited capacities of the public sector. Participatory governance schemes that operate exclusively on the basis of local government resources are fragile and prone to dependence. Civic ecosystems need to be empowered not only by autonomous deliberative infrastructures, but also in terms of fundraising and networking. Community foundations play an important role in this respect in many cities of the region (see the case study "Community foundations – Romania").

# Conclusions and recommendations

Although the **COVID-19 pandemic has caused a collaboration meltdown** in many of the case we investigated, CSOs provided flexible voluntary services even during this period. This disengagement happened despite the fact that municipalities had to establish strong, transparent and accountable measures to ensure proper funding allocation and regulation almost overnight. This phenomenon draws our attention to the resilience and sustainability of collaborative practices. Civic ecosystems have to identify and enforce baseline requirements for democratic governance, including remedies for the logistical and capacity constraints that contributed to the near shutdown of local governance mechanisms. Coming up with quick responses to unforeseen circumstances by involving and linking up local stakeholders is in everyone's interest. Ensuring continuity instead of having to start from scratch again and again presupposes permanent links between the civic ecosystem and the local administration, as well as knowledge transfers and organic development between waves of mobilization, even in the face of occasional stagnation and dead-ends. Civic initiatives that reach maturity could serve as incubators for other initiatives that perform more specialized activities in different organizational formats (see the case studies "ULE – Hungary," "Dąbrowa Górnicza – Poland").

Several instruments are available for strengthening the internal coherence of a local civic ecosystem. Perhaps the most important element is the **availability of public information.** Local administrations must inform the public, provide regularly updated and accessible information about the policy process and share data to foster evidence-based advocacy and real-time public assessment. Local governments have to develop and adhere to **transparent, user-friendly procedures in decision making** to encourage civic participation. Strategic planning and policy programs are important tools for synchronizing public demands and political will. There will probably always be decisions that are made before those affected hear about them, leaving them with no option but to accept them, but this should be reduced to a minimum. Our interviewees often cited **a lack of responsiveness** to social inputs, a systemic lack of communication and a lack of honesty. One of the key elements of local governance that our research identified is the **operation of local media**. Media coverage is an important resource for advocacy groups, which is often unevenly distributed among the actors while favoring those who are close to the decision makers. While there are good examples of independent editorial work, most often the only possibility for CSOs is to create alternative coverage for their work. For example, whether or not a city grants an organization permission to post on its official social media page is subject to little or no formal regulation, with no possibilities of appeal. In such cases of deliberate exclusion, a coordinated action of various actors is needed. Even the formal institutions of the local civil society, such as CSO roundtables, which have been set up to provide for regular consultation with the local government and to act as a common lobbying platform for the whole civic ecosystem, strive to solve the problem of disproportionate media coverage.

Our respondents observed the same problem with regard to the **distribution of local government funding**, which led to the decision of several organizations not to accept financial or non-monetary support. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the financial aspect is central for many local governments when it comes to partnerships; and to some extent, civic independence is "compromised" anyway whenever a CSO is cooperating with a local government (see the case studies "C8 – Hungary" and "Gorzów Wielkopolski – Poland"). While any modification of the funding schemes is a potential source of conflict, a restructuring of the resources (such as grants, administrative services and other goods or services) is often badly needed to strengthen the civic ecosystem. As a general rule, a clear distinction should be made between project funding and the remuneration for public services, where different solutions compete with each other. Project funding plays an important role in improving civil society. As the diversity of available resources contributes to increased adaptability, a flexible and applicant-friendly grant distribution system should be combined with community organization methods. The funding system must put local outcomes first, rather than the reputations of specific organizations, with an emphasis on projects that strengthen the local civic ecosystem (e.g. to bridge the digital divide, involve marginalized groups, promote volunteering etc.). Local governments can serve this purpose also by other innovative means, such as co-funding **local crowdfunding or participatory budgeting** initiatives, where projects are implemented through ad-hoc coalitions. Likewise, CSOs can play an active role in organizing different groups to elaborate a proposal. Through involvement in budgetary processes, CSOs can monitor local authorities and public service delivery to create an enabling environment for engaging with citizens.

Finally, there is an urgent need for cooperation between local governments and local civil society to come up with **joint advocacy initiatives for higher-level policy change**. This is all the more important, since it is often higher-level regulations that make cooperation between the two sides impossible. While the trust of local actors in EU institutions is high, these institutions seem ill-equipped in terms of funding, capacity and tools to respond to the shrinking space for civil society, or to marshal the combined pressure of external and local actors in advocating for shared policy goals. A strong political or financial incentive from the donor community in the form of powerful campaign hooks that the local civil society could use would entail a major policy shift. Several respondents also raised the need to review the calls for proposals and tender procedures open to NGOs. While EU institutions and the embassies of Western countries continue to act as an engine for the promotion of democracy and human rights, it is quite telling that our interviews made no references to EU programs when it came to participation, involvement and partnership. Some respondents even claimed that the local administration is not prepared for the joint application for such project-based grants. In these contexts, the EU should increase support to CSOs to build their capacities for engagement with local authorities and local communities, with a view to promoting joint participation in policy-making. The capacity to foster such collaborations is an important asset when it comes to strengthening the democratic space and reestablishing trust in representative democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Hungary

BUDAKALÁSZ

EGER

BUDAPEST

ALSÓNÉMEDI

GYÁL

PÉCS

Sites where interviews
were conducted
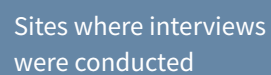
Country chapter
The changing local government landscape in Hungary: is there a place for civil society?

In Hungary, the relationship between local governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) has always been a dynamic and sensitive one. This chapter provides an overview of how this relationship has changed after 30 years of democratization and identifies the main issues and recent trends, notably regarding the promotion of more democratic and transparent mechanisms that carry the potential of larger structural changes. Our conclusions draw on research that involved 21 semi-structured interviews with experts (4), local government employees (7), and CSOs (11) covering several different parts of Hungary, including Alsónémedi, Budakalász, Eger, Gyál, Pécs, and Budapest, the capital, at both metropolitan and district level.

The political–economic context of civil society development

The inclusion of civil society in decision-making processes has been widely debated since the first multi-party election took place in Hungary in 1990. New regulations were put in place through the 1989 Act on the Right for Associating, which legally acknowledged existing informal practices. Although the number of organizations increased rapidly, the relationship between the public sector and civil society was based on spontaneous collaborations that lacked a strategic vision and scarcely resulted in institutionalized practices. The mid-1990s were a time when local governments extensively created non-profit organizations, as a result of the 1993 amendment to the Civil Code.[15] Early attempts to incorporate CSOs – imbued with important symbolic capital during the democratization process – into local decision making mostly failed, due to a lack of professionalization of the CSO sector. During the first Orbán government (1998-2002), the "rural" civil society infrastructure was created, providing financial support schemes through so-called "Non-Profit Service Centers" located in the county seats. In light of the closed decision-making processes, civil society was mainly involved in decisions through representative bodies such as municipal councils, with limited influence on public policies (Földi, 2009).

In 2003, the left–liberal government continued to develop the country's civil society strategy, by targeting the creation of a more autonomous civil society (Brachinger, 2008). The NGO sector started to stabilize after the Law on the National Civil Base Program (NCA) was passed, and national and regional NGOs increased in number. However, they operated under the tight control of the funding authorities, serving as more efficient distributors of targeted welfare and community funding, but in a rather ambiguous way. NGOs became less autonomous as political interests interfered with their tasks, both at the central and the local government level (Szalai, Svensson and Vince, 2017). Political control resulted in blurred lines between the public and civil society sphere, which gave rise to corrupt practices and to even less transparency in the distribution of funds. Developmental programs funded by both local and international donors that focused on training civil society and community leaders contributed to their lopsided professionalization, which was characterized by weak administrative capacities and an absence of independent fundraising efforts.

The 2010 elections brought the right-wing populist Fidesz party to power with a two-thirds majority, which prompted the new government to launch a series of radical legislative changes that culminated in the adoption of a new constitution in 2011. The Fidesz government was able to hold on to its two-thirds majority in 2014 and 2018. The independence of civil society became highly politicized during this era, as Fidesz imposed a polarizing political narrative that placed "the nation" in opposition to "foreign agents," embodied by the left-liberal elite and foreign-funded civic organizations (Gagyi, 2016). The new wave of civil society mobilizations in the 2010s coincided with widening political cleavages: CSOs became heavily involved in party politics, putting in doubt the possibility of a "pure" civil society (Gerő and Kopper, 2013). While the nationalist discourse attacked CSOs through anti-Soros and anti-immigrant propaganda, the NGO scene reacted with concerns over the loss of democratic governance mechanisms, the freedom of the local and national media, or the forced departure of Central European University from Budapest.

Following the adoption of the new constitution in 2011, the government enacted considerable changes to the legislation governing civil society initiatives, which constrained citizen mobilization in several ways. In parallel with the ever greater centralization of powers, the government's illiberal measures facilitated the exclusion of autonomous institutions and divergent voices (Majtényi, Kopper and Susánszky, 2018). Furthermore, the 2011 law[16] curtailed the autonomy of CSOs, reduced their funding opportunities and created new regulations that induced greater bureaucratic pressure (see Nagy, 2016).

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15 1993 XCII. Act amending certain provisions of the Civil Code. Due to the change in the nature of the state's role in fulfilling public tasks, new types of non-profit organizations were established that created a bridge between CSOs based on voluntary initiatives and public institutions fulfilling state duties. Public foundations are a special type of such organizations.

16 2011 CLXXV. Act on the Right of Association, Public Benefit Status and the Operation and Funding of Non-Governmental Organizations

In addition, local governments have seen their autonomy erode over the past decade, due to a weakening of their capacities and shrinking financial resources. The 2011 amendments to the 1990 Act on Local Governments[17] aimed at a re-centralization of finance, healthcare and education and thus put an end to efforts to create a decentralized local government system (Pálné Kovács *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, managing city-level policies has become a much more difficult task, since national-level policies interfere with the management and implementation of collaborations. Besides, the collaborations between local governments and CSOs receive less and less funding from the national budget, which has increased their reliance on EU and foreign funds. On the one hand, local grants and funding schemes are scarce and create a high degree of dependence on the part of local CSOs. On top of that, as István Sebestény, a researcher analyzing NGO-statistics notes, local governments are only aware of roughly one-third of the existing CSOs, which dominate the field of formal collaboration while maintaining a very narrow and apolitical focus. On the other hand, applying for EU funds remains out of reach for most organizations, since they lack the necessary administrative, language and networking capacities and experience to successfully apply for competitive, large-scale funding schemes.

1989 Law on freedom of association	1996 Law on 1% support for CSOs	1998 Law on public benefit status of NPOs	2005 Law on public benefit volunteering	2007 Public benefit company replaced by nonprofit company	2011 NCF replaced by state-controlled National Cooperation Fund	2014-2015 Government attack against foreign-supported CSOs
1987 Legal form of foundation reestablished	1994 Public benefit company and public law NPOs	1996-2008 Differentiation and gradual decrease of tax advantages	2004 Establishment of National Civil Fund (NCF)	2006 Creation of legal form of social cooperative (NCF)	2011 New regulation of public benefit status	2011 Tax incentives for direct corporate donations to sports

Key events in the development of Hungarian civil society. Source: Vándor *et al.*, 2017.

To sum up, the collaborations between civil society and local governments are strongly influenced by changes in the political-economic context of Hungary: since 2010, opportunities for influencing national-level policies have gradually disappeared for most NGOs.[18] Therefore, these organizations have instead focused on local politics and micro projects where it still appears possible to have an impact and carry out advocacy work. Yet, the opportunities for formal collaborations have been curbed both through the reshuffling of local government responsibilities and through tighter regulations of the civil society sector.

A balancing act between dependence and shrinking resources

To prevent being subsumed into local party politics or becoming too dependent on local governments, CSOs have used several tactics to increase the level of trust and their reputation among citizens.

One of the key efforts of CSOs has been to create visibility for their projects, by targeting tangible and short-term results. In doing so, they are able to avoid taking political risks or getting lost in the bureaucratic processes of the local government. To focus mainly on non-party political issues, CSOs use a wide variety of tools. Surveys, door-to-door communication or fostering participation on public issues are important elements when it comes to raising awareness of specific matters. For example, in the 8th district of Budapest, C8 (Case Study 2) followed this strategy in its campaign for the 2019 municipal elections, reaching out to residents in a proactive way.

Many respondents point to a second obstacle to their successful operation, namely the biased local media. For example, in Budapest, the municipality does not ensure proper media coverage of collaborations, meaning that it is mainly up to the CSOs themselves to publicize them. The media could play an important role in channeling demands, but Hungary's media environment is currently very biased in general, with Fidesz receiving much greater coverage throughout the country. Therefore, seeking political alliances among the opposition does not offer the prospect of improved visibility for the organizations. In addition, the political divides do not always help CSOs to make themselves visible, especially if their demands and criticism target both sides, and are not taken up by any political party. Local CSOs compete with each other for publicity, which often results in one powerful actor being handpicked by local politicians as the voice of the CSO sector. The rotating presidency of the Civil Society Roundtable in Eger, which divides media attention among the various CSO actors, is a rare counterexample.

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17   2011 CLXXXIX. Act on Local Governments of Hungary
18   Except for certain NGOs that carry out political activities in support of certain policies that are important for the government (also known as GONGOs – government-organized non-governmental organizations) or charity organizations that manage outsourced public duties, which are often run by officials who also hold political office in the area of social policy.

What is more, relying on the input of citizens is a rather new phenomenon for CSOs. Promoting a culture of volunteering and recruiting and training new activists and members are key criteria for making their actions more visible (see Case Study 2). This is very difficult due to the fact that most people in the larger cities have full-time jobs, with little free time to deal with public affairs. Consequently, the CSO sector often depends on other resources, such as expert knowledge or national and international networks.

However, there is a sign of hope, as Hungary's culture of donating has gone through a major change in recent years, according to our interviewees, which they tend to attribute to the central government's adversarial approach to CSOs: this hostile environment pushes them to seek alliances not only with local governments, but with citizens directly. As Cili Lohász, the founder of VaLyo, recalls, "15 years ago, it was impossible to collect this level of donations, and now it is becoming more and more common." Similarly, Erika Barna, an expert on community foundations highlights that next to corporate social responsibility and charity, local donors play a prominent role in stabilizing the income of organizations. Therefore, embeddedness in the local environment is now an important factor in managing successful fundraising campaigns that target individual donations.

The problems of embeddedness

Even though the participatory turn has gained ground, especially after the October 2019 municipal elections, an urbanist working in the field notes that he does not "feel that there is a civil society boom at the moment". Instead, "a lot of the organizations have entered another phase; those that have been around during the last decade, they are becoming more professional, and do important work in the fields for which they have been fighting in for years". These civil society members are often more progressive than the previous type of CSOs, which during the 2000s had the chance to participate in local partnership models that were partly influenced by EU funds earmarked for various forms of collaborative urban development.

To counter the impact of overly bureaucratic processes, the new wave of CSOs since the 2010s has pursued more flexible types of cooperation, for example by turning towards residents rather than local governments. As a CSO founder from Budapest explains, "there was this 'enlightenment' in the civil sphere around 2015-2016, when the national government started an attack against foreign-funded NGOs." CSOs realized that without society backing them, it would be impossible for them to achieve their goals, which caused them to try to become more embedded in their local contexts by tackling local issues. As the urbanist expert, who often plays an advisory role in collaborative practices, notes, "the next round would be to strengthen the whole ecosystem. Local governments are not yet good at networking, we try to help in that. The Municipality of Budapest has held meetings with civil society actors, but I'm not sure how far this will go." In his point of view, there is a will but not yet a way to build the necessary infrastructure for implementing the vision of a collaborative turn.

Another issue affecting the dynamics of collaboration is the division of the CSO sector, not in a political sense, but rather in the way the organizations approach collaboration with local governments. The more established CSO actors are usually better embedded in the local governments' cooperation schemes, as they take over municipal duties by performing welfare services, mostly for disadvantaged groups. Newer, more informal civil society groups often criticize these established organizations, since over time they can easily become coopted by the system, thereby sustaining the status quo instead of highlighting structural problems and using their position to lobby for changes (Case Studies 3 and 4). Such criticism most often targets the lack of transparency of these collaborations, as well as their shortcomings when it comes to empowering vulnerable groups or showing solidarity with other, less embedded CSOs and their demands. Meanwhile, the newer CSOs put much greater efforts into networking, by supporting both bottom-up initiatives and each other, as well as by maintaining a more critical approach towards local governments. This is the case in the city of Pécs, where traditional CSOs have a formalized, financial and secure relationship with the local government, while grassroots organizations do not receive the same kind of attention, although they are often much more present in the everyday lives of disadvantaged citizens. While the Maltese Charity Service has a long history of performing outsourced public duties by providing care and assistance for vulnerable groups, A Város Mindenkié (AVM) Pécs and Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (EEA), which are more critical towards the local government, are largely excluded from the decision-making processes.

Debating institutionalization: CSO strategies from conflict to cooperation

Even though the aim of the political discourse at the national level is to strengthen the divide among civil society members, the majority of the organizations we interviewed have not developed a clear political vision. As a member of the Civil Society Roundtable from Eger notes, there is a constant focus on civic issues with no particular interest in "big politics." Instead, CSOs try to overcome the legal, financial and regulatory obstacles that prevent them from achieving their goals. The main challenge in terms of collaboration is the "taming" of critical voices when CSOs become formal partners of the local government. Our respondents agree that working together with local governments often causes them to change their tactics, as they become more careful and on occasion even stop to communicate until the

local government has framed its own position on the projects in question. The reason for this change in behavior is partly the sensitive nature of formal collaborations, alongside the hope that being more constructive will lead to better results in the end. Ultimately, the goal is to change ineffective processes and negative reflexes. To this end, CSOs choose different paths, either by being confrontational or by trying to find common ground.

Depending on the goal and motivation of CSOs, some respondents believe that the only way to exert pressure is to remain critical, by monitoring the everyday practices of public administrations from the outside. As the founder of Civil Kapocs, a watchdog organization, explains, "in the long run, collaboration with local governments cannot be successful, as they don't have any real interest in finding common ground. The control mechanisms that we provide are working against them." In order to perform this control function, CSOs have to take a "militant approach" by actively engaging in a conflictive relationship with the local governments: suing them to disclose data or pressuring them to become more transparent by making documents available to the public.

Some of the other CSOs meanwhile maintain that besides playing the role of watchdog, they also have to acknowledge the necessity of an occasionally more cooperative relationship with local governments. As the founder of Civil Kalász explains, the goal is to make decisions together, involving as many people as possible. "If we can clearly define our needs, it is easier to shape the approach of others, and this is the practice I am currently missing." For these organizations, depending on the context and the issue at stake, dialog is more important than confrontation, given that the role of CSOs is to channel citizen demands to the local government by providing constructive suggestions. In other words, they prioritize the creation of communication platforms, where ideas can be shared and developed. Usually, these CSOs are more informal, similarly to the confrontational groups, with a very clear agenda that they intend to push through. They are consistent in their actions for reaching their goals, build public support for their cause, and devote time to raise awareness of the importance of sustaining channels for effective mediation between citizens and local governments. As the example of C8 shows (Case Study 2), such a clear vision includes the idea of self-governance, enabling citizens and elected members of the local government to act as equal partners.

While some groups cite the possibility of dialog as their main goal, others focus on collaboration that will produce concrete results. If the goal of CSOs is to change a certain legislation or policy, their strategy is concentrated on more practical aspects: providing alternatives to inadequate public policies and highlighting the need for systemic change (see Case Study 3). In the case of the Kőbánya district in Budapest, the Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület association (ULE) combines local embeddedness (involving affected citizens directly) with public policy goals (a "housing first" approach), by building on a discourse of the right to housing and the associated responsibility of the public sector in providing help to those in need. CSOs offering alternative approaches to existing policies believe that a long-term approach is necessary to find better solutions. To this end, cooperation, autonomy and identifying potential political allies are important elements in order to be able to experiment with alternative scenarios that will eventually achieve the desired structural changes.

Finally, several organizations believe that the best strategy is to become involved in local politics to be able to upscale their demands and effect change. As the founder of Civil Kalász explains, "dealing with local causes is always a political act, you cannot avoid engaging in politics." CSOs that decide to participate in local politics and elections by endorsing politicians or political formations find it difficult to be perceived as independent by the public, since many people view them as an extension of the local government. Nevertheless, they often consider campaigning for an oppositional candidate who shares the same values to be a sound strategy for reaching their goals. The example of C8 in the 8th district of Budapest (Case Study 2) is a case in point: When C8's candidate won the municipal elections, the organization was torn between members who entered local government and those who remained outside of it. Many vocal residents see C8 as a privileged CSO or a local party, which goes against the activist's perception of their situation. C8 does not accept subsidies from the municipality and does not even rent any premises from it, but this is hard to explain to the public. Drawing on these two examples, the main difficulty that CSOs face is the need to explain the difference between local and party politics. The goal of these organizations is to emphasize that they do not necessarily want to become decision makers themselves, but instead aim to provide a platform for discussion.

In parallel with the differnt approaches of the CSO sector outlined above, local governments are also facing new challenges. The implementation of the participatory turn that the opposition promised after the 2019 municipal elections has still not materialized. So far, the Municipality of Budapest has appointed one deputy mayor to be in charge of participatory mechanisms and to facilitate civil society inclusion in decision-making processes (Case Study 1), while other local governments have proposed to follow a similar, more inclusive approach aimed at resolving the conflicts that previously characterized the relationship between CSOs and the public sector (Case Studies 2 and 4). Notwithstanding the outbreak of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, which turned into a major stumbling block for the implementation of these plans, several other obstacles remain: how to define clear roles and responsibilities within municipal governments for effecting a real participatory turn, what part civil society should play in mediating between the needs of citizens and local governments, and how to include a wider number of CSOs in this process rather than simply deepening the relationships with existing partners.

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List of respondents

Case Study 1: Budapest – promoting a participative turn
Máté Lukács | Coordinator of Járókelő
Ádám Kobrizsa | Founder of Mindspace
Cili Lohász | Founder of VaLyo
Gábor Kerpel-Fronius & András Szeles | Deputy Mayor of Budapest & the City Hall officer responsible for relations with civil society

Case Study 2: C8 – civil society actors in politics: role models faced with a role dilemma
A founding member of C8 who is active outside the municipality
Two delegates of C8 serving on municipal committees
A C8 activist working for the municipality (Office of Public Participation)

Case study 3: Pécs: developing a social program for the city
Fanni Aradi | Member of AVM Pécs
Ildikó Bokrétás | Member of Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (Pécs)
Szilvia Bognár | Deputy Mayor of Pécs

Case study 4: "From the street to housing" in Kőbánya: an unlikely collaboration
Vera Kovács | Founder of ULE – Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület, Budapest
Géza Mustó and Tibor Weeber | Deputy Mayors of Budapest's 10th district

Formal cooperation / civil society roundtable
Tibor Csathó | Member of the Életfa Association and the local Civil Society Roundtable (Eger)
Balázs Szücs | Deputy Mayor of Budapest's 7th district

Grassroots activist groups that are active at the local level
Ágnes Szép-Magyar | Founder of Civil Kalász (Budakalász)
Zoltán Juhász | Founder of Civil Kapocs (Alsónémedi)
Andrea Homok | Former community organizer at Eleven Gyál (Gyál)

Experts
Gergely Lukácsházi | Budapest Dialóg
István Sebestény | Statistician at the Hungarian Central Statistical Office Urbanist (asked to remain anonymous)
Erika Barna | Director of the Ferencváros Community Foundation, Budapest

Case study 1

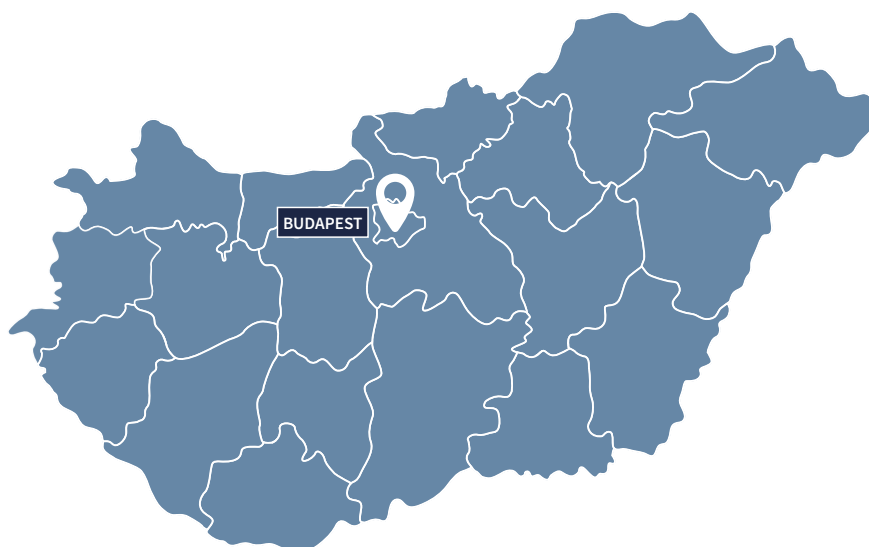# Budapest: promoting a participative turn in governance through urban interventions

Interviewees

Máté Lukács | Coordinator of Járókelő
Ádám Kobrizsa | Founder of Mindspace
Cili Lohász | Founder of VaLyó
Gábor Kerpel-Fronius & András Szeles | Deputy Mayor of Budapest & the City Hall
official responsible for relations with civil society

The city and its context

In 1990, the Municipality of Budapest was divided into 22 districts (a 23rd was added in 1994), separating the city and its districts into equal entities within a two-tier system, although in a fragmented manner. For example, public transportation and infrastructure remained centralized powers in the hands of the Municipality of Budapest, while the distribution of resources became decentralized. The guidelines for collaboration were mostly informal during the 1990s, but in parallel with Hungary's EU accession and the subsequent emphasis on partnership, Act 61/2008 (XI. 21.) of the General Assembly of Budapest formalized the contours of collaboration between civil society and local government in the city.

After the municipal elections of November 2019, the left-liberal opposition gained power in Budapest and promised to change the course the city had followed under the previous mayor, who was supported by the Fidesz party, which controls the national government. During the mandate of the previous mayor, between 2010 and 2019, the deputy mayors did not have any political responsibilities. This changed in 2019, as the new mayor put the three deputy mayors also in charge of political decisions. In November 2019, as a gesture of good will, around 90 civil society organizations (CSOs) were invited to City Hall to open up discussions on collaborative practices and to show that the municipality is willing to put its relationship with them on a new footing.

After the 2019 municipal elections, similar changes in power took place in many of Budapest's districts, where the newly elected leaders proposed a more progressive policy environment, by employing "NGO-minded staff," as Gábor Kerpel-Fronius, the deputy mayor responsible for smart city issues and civil engagement explains. A look at the past few years reveals that the decision makers had already been moving towards more participative mechanisms, irrespective of the election results, as some experts we interviewed noted cautiously. Even though participative mechanisms have become more popular in recent years, an urbanist we interviewed points to the ambiguous nature of such practices, which can be both a form of emancipation and a way of coopting civil society dynamics for political legitimation. However, the Municipality of Budapest and the new mayor have shown a much greater interest in CSOs and their ideas about the city, for example by actively participating in meetings and promoting inclusive governance mechanisms.

Bottom-up initiatives with a focus on the quality of public spaces

After the 2019 elections, CSOs that have been active for years finally had the chance to be in the spotlight. Interviewees from CSOs relate a common experience of City Hall finally initiating an open and trustful relationship with them. In one way or another, this has led to discussions and meetings about future possibilities of collaboration.

Járókelő (*Streetwalker*) is a Fix My Street-like online platform that operates in 23 cities and in each of the 23 districts of Budapest. Citizens can submit complaints about problems in their neighborhood, accompanied by a photo and a short description, which is then published on Jarokelo.hu and sent via email to the responsible authority to highlight the problem. Járókelő, with the help of local activists, facilitates these procedures by sending the complaint directly to the competent local entity/organization (which is particularly relevant in the multi-level governance scheme of Budapest). The website has been operating in Budapest since October 2012. It added the first other city to its service in June 2014 and then released an Android mobile application. For its work in connecting citizens to municipalities and helping them solve local problems, Járókelő received the SozialMarie Award for Social Innovation in May 2014. The website has around 20,000 visitors per month and registers 30 to 50 complaints per day in Budapest alone. Járókelő tries to keep the relationship at a technical level, rather than directly appealing to the political level. It works with municipalities and local companies (those responsible for road maintenance, park maintenance, etc.) to improve road maintenance and solve public complaints more effectively. It thus encourages citizen participation at the local level and enhances the quality of communication with local governments. To avoid political conflicts and situations in which conflicts of interest might arise, Járókelő relies on transparency and fact-based communication, open data and open evaluations. When the platform was launched, the municipalities were unprepared for this type of engagement and how to deal with citizen complaints; they failed to fully understand the platform or how it could be beneficial for them. As many of the municipalities lack the capacity of innovation to make their services more efficient and user-friendly, Járókelő provides a platform that supports their work – it can create a mutually beneficial win-win scenario, by improving public spaces and building up trust between local governments and citizens. Some districts do not respond at all, while others answer by post, demanding that someone at Járókelő scan and then send the letter by email to the complainant and upload it on the platform. The lack of effective communication is also revealed by the fact that the local authorities frequently use patronizing and simplistic language in their replies to citizens.

VaLyó (Város és folyó – *City and River*) is an organization that aims for a better use of the Danube river in Budapest, by bringing it closer to citizens through various projects. It was founded as an association in 2014, but its initial activities were more informal and included partaking in different projects aimed at utilizing the public spaces along the Danube. In recent decades, the Danube has only been included in large-scale urban planning strategies, whereas the idea behind VaLyó was to initiate small-scale projects, to make the river more accessible to citizens, often by temporarily reducing car traffic. The creation of VaLyó was also driven by the fact that existing green movements lacked a positive message and only expressed criticism towards current practices and policies. Instead, VaLyó's mission focuses on activities that show what could be done in the city, "even if it is only a two-square meter space," as Cili Lohász, the organization's founder, explains. All its members are part-time volunteers who do not receive any income from the projects. This is a deliberate tactic in order to avoid constantly having to apply for funds to sustain the organization, which instead relies mostly on donations or organized fundraising events. As its founder notes, VaLyó tries to be different from "traditional" CSOs by relying mostly on contacts from local, more embedded members of civil society. It also has an ambivalent relationship with local governments, sometimes more collaborative and often confrontational, depending on the issue at stake. In general, the organization tries to approach local governments in a collaborative manner, but if the situation requires it, they will not shy away from criticism. Under the previous mayor of Budapest, the relationship was generally hostile, and VaLyó was "blacklisted" from receiving funds, as part of the political attack on the NGO sphere.

Mindspace focuses on issues related to smart city visions, education, the organization of conferences and the "gamification" of urban interventions. Active in the Central Eastern European region, it develops and implements the soft elements of urban interventions instead of engaging in more rigid planning procedures. The organization's goal is to create a more creative bureaucracy, for which it fosters participatory planning mechanisms. Its approach is based on process design, from web development and graphics through to professional facilitation, in order to promote more effective and transparent bureaucratic procedures. Since it was founded in 2011, Mindspace's financial situation has changed significantly. In the beginning, its work was largely subsidized by EU funds, but it recently started to have a contract-based relationship with local governments, based on the provision of facilitation services. Currently, Mindspace has two work agreements with local governments, one with the Municipality of Budapest and another with the city's 8th district. As part of these projects, it is responsible for the implementation of the participatory mechanisms of the Integrated Settlement Development plans, for developing an online platform for the participatory design of public urban spaces, and for convening a group of subject matter experts for facilitated workshops.

Renewing the institutional framework for participation

The Municipality of Budapest has initiated a series of meetings with CSOs to renew the 2008 act that defines the framework of civic consultation processes with various stakeholders. The idea is to better institutionalize these mechanisms, instead of engaging in ad hoc collaborations. Until formal rules have been defined, this ad hoc format promotes subjective decisions and collaborations, which go against the aims of the new leadership. Nevertheless, for the time being, some progressive and more experienced NGOs have taken the lead to deepen their relationship with City Hall.

The Civil Society Relations Office already operated during the period from 2010 to 2019, but it only had two municipal employees, and CSOs were only included to legitimize decisions that the municipality had already taken. The tasks of the former Civil Society Relations Office were mixed and included matters that could not be dealt with by any other departments (such as the issue of minority self-governments). Now it already has a staff of five or six employees, with plans to expand it to 10 in total. The same office will also be responsible for the development of a participatory budget.

At the moment, three areas for civic-local government cooperation are in the making, based on a new umbrella model with three main focus areas: social/care, participation and environmental issues, with a working group dedicated to each in order to address particularly problematic issues (social/care will probably will be the most comprehensive, including housing, disabilities, drug use, Roma minorities). The Municipality of Budapest intends to create an open registration procedure to avoid personal preferences for working with certain organizations, and to open up collaborative processes to a wider group of dedicated civil society actors. For each of these areas, plenaries as well as more frequent meetings are planned that will bring together CSO representatives, municipal officials and political decision makers. The green working group was the first to be established, based on the suggestions of green CSOs, already in December 2019.

As the deputy mayor responsible for participation and the civic referent explains, a serious cultural transformation is needed: "in its normal, comfortable processes, the bureaucratic machine considers CSOs to be a nuisance," which needs to change, he argues, emphasizing that local government employees need to learn how to do things differently. The deputy mayor relies on an active lobby of "single-issue" CSOs, as he explains, and it will be up to his decision which issues will gain more attention. By the end of the cycle, the municipality's goal is to become a much more open institution, where CSOs "still look at politicians with a suspicious eye, but a normal discussion can happen." The aim is to create an environment where disagreements are possible, in order to promote constructive and intensive dialog. For this happen, one of the main tasks is to create channels for facilitating communication.

Careful steps ahead

Half a year after the 2019 municipal elections, partly due to process of creating the new roles and partly because of the pandemic, fewer collaborations have been realized than initially planned. The original budget has been cut and broader participatory mechanisms have been cancelled or reduced. Nevertheless, the formation of the environmental working group is considered to be a positive outcome of the cultural change in the municipality, as is the approval, by the Budapest General Assembly, of a monitoring system aimed at preventing corruption and promoting transparency (known as the *"This is the Minimum!"* program). The main goal is to formalize the relationship between civil society and local government, in order to reduce ad hoc collaborations. The municipality would like to see as many stakeholders as possible participate in the near future, not only a narrow circle of CSOs.

The emphasis of the new leadership is clearly on the cultural change that it could bring to the municipality. However, since the central government is reducing the responsibilities and the independence of local governments, it is becoming more difficult for the Municipality of Budapest to implement the original plans. It already had to cut the planned budgets for collaborative practices and cancel some of the meetings with CSOs. "We will have to be in touch with many organizations to carry out measures that have a low budget but a high impact," as the deputy mayor puts it. The ultimate goal is to show the country that CSOs can be treated as partners rather than enemies. Reducing car traffic has been one of the main promises of the new mayor, and to this end, the municipality collaborated with VaLyó to close the Danube embankment to cars on weekends during the summer. As Cili Lohász explains, VaLyó already has a decade of experience, and managed to find common ground with the municipality to formalize their relationship even in the face of the COVID-19 restrictions. The organization had to go back to its roots: working from a low budget, relying on its CSO network to manage projects and working in an uncertain environment. Meanwhile, Mindspace has experienced less of a setback in carrying out its projects, given that it largely relies on online platforms to reach out to citizens.

Barriers to making a difference

Although the pandemic slowed down the renewal of the institutional framework, under the new city leadership there is a general spirit of optimism among CSOs. However, the activists emphasize that "the old reflexes still work" and that they are currently waiting to see if things will go in the right direction. The CSOs note that in general, there is still a lack of transparency as to who is responsible for which projects within City Hall. The distribution of roles is not yet clear, due to the creation of new positions and responsibilities, and therefore the communication among municipal employees is not yet efficient, which needs to be improved in the future.

Moreover, the major issue related to these collaborations is to forge a more coherent network from the initiatives that are being pushed forward. This could work well in general, but there is a misunderstanding on the part of the municipalities: they believe that they only need to communicate with residents, but they should also help small businesses and CSOs to become more independent and financially stable. The municipalities have to understand that CSOs cannot always work for free, which is currently the case on many occasions. The work they do has to be better acknowledged, and if CSOs are to be part of a new governance model, the financial foundation of their collaboration with the local authorities also needs to be improved.

Case study 2
C8 – civil society actors in politics: role models faced with a role dilemma

Interviewees

Five members of C8, including a founding member, three C8 delegates to the municipal committees and one activist who works for the municipality.

Inspired by the municipalist movement of Ada Colau, a civic activist from Barcelona who launched a political movement, the organization C8 – Civilek Józsefvárosért (*Citizens for Józsefváros*) conducted a successful election campaign in the 8th district of Budapest, with the result that András Pikó (C8), a former journalist, won the local elections. The success of this participatory grassroots campaign is illustrative of a wider phenomenon in Hungary, where civic activists have gotten involved in institutionalized politics, and (in some places by collaborating with oppositional political forces) managed to win mayoral races in the October 2019 municipal elections.

Context
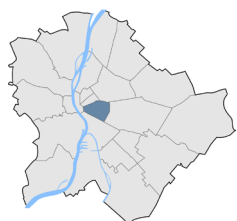
Map source: Wikipedia

In the 1990s, the 8th district appeared in the public discourse as a stigmatized "ghetto," and in the case of the large proportion of Roma and immigrant residents, this stigma was ethnicized. Since the early 2000s, and especially after metro line 4 was opened in 2014, the district has become more and more attractive to young people for its cheaper rents, bringing about large-scale developments and *gentrification*, rising rents and demographic change. Between 2009 and 2019, right-wing Fidesz mayors governed the district with a "law and order" approach. They continued the *"rehabilitation programs"* of the previous liberal mayors (which included both participatory elements toward community renewal and heavy-handed police operations), controlled poverty through harsh, punitive measures and tried to dominate local civil society by creating new organizations and dominating the local media. This, however, gave rise to a vivid alternative cultural-political resistance centered around community centers and social initiatives. The team that rallied around C8 during the election campaign included prominent figures from the grassroots community, specifically from the housing movement. The local civil society landscape included several other initiatives, organized mainly in specific neighborhoods. Some of them are partly coopted by the local government, others are active in specific areas (cultural heritage, built environment, social and minority issues). For a long time, local politics has been characterized by a low level of public participation. For socio-political reasons, voter turnout is lower than in any other areas of Budapest, even with the slight increase from 35% to 40% in the 2019 elections.
The path to victory is paved with failures

Before the 2019 local elections, it became clear that no opposition party was keen to field its own candidate against the incumbent Fidesz mayor in the 8th district, which opened the door for candidates from civil society. This political vacuum is the outcome of previous electoral failures and the general weakness of opposition party organizations in Hungary. However, this window of opportunity was also the outcome of C8's effort to appear as an equal partner, instead of allowing the decision on this "lost cause district" to be made in the closed-door meetings of party officials. C8 followed a political strategy that drew on the lessons learnt from the past years of civic struggle for political representation. From this political context, C8 emerged as a "non-specialist" civil society organization (CSO), which can be described as an umbrella organization that absorbs local activists and citizens from very different backgrounds who share a dissatisfaction with local politics. Although members of C8 have also carried out advocacy campaigns around particular local issues, it should more accurately be described as a movement that is inseparable from its specific political context.

C8's predecessor was the KÖZÖD Civic Association, an informal group recruited from the local elite (activists, intellectuals, former politicians) with around 10 members. From 2014, KÖZÖD was active mostly on social issues, the management of the municipal housing stock, representing the interests of local citizens, and watchdog activities against the lawlessness of local government. The local knowledge and expertise of its members helped KÖZÖD to successfully interfere in municipal decisions. In 2017, there was a by-election for one of the seats on the city council, where KÖZÖD and other activists ran an independent campaign for Márta Bolba, a socially minded Lutheran pastor from the district. The opposition parties did not support her, but stood behind another candidate, a local gangster rapper, which resulted in the right-wing Fidesz candidate winning the election. While the move of entering local politics had already sparked debates among the members of KÖZÖD, this grassroots campaign allowed them to gain experience in managing a professional campaign and changed their focus from being more of an expert organization to more direct engagement and embeddedness.

In 2018, another by-election became necessary when the previous mayor, Fidesz strongman Máté Kocsis, was elected to parliament. This time, civic groups and political parties coordinated their efforts and endorsed Péter Győri, an independent candidate and founder of Menhely Alapítvány (Shelter Foundation), an organization that has supported homeless people in Budapest since 1990. Several subsequent C8 members deliberately abstained from participating in this campaign, which ended with a disappointing result. However, this district-level campaign and its shortcomings again enhanced the activists' knowledge of professional campaigning. András Pikó worked as a PR adviser on this campaign, but still not as a high-profile actor. Through discussions about future strategy, this campaign laid the foundations for C8, although the association was only formally registered in September 2019. Those involved in this process realized that the opposition parties, while recognizing their contribution (in manpower), gave them no leadership role in the campaign and no say in choosing the candidate or in writing the program. The campaign staff was also led by the parties, which caused no direct conflict with the political actors but influenced C8's future strategy. C8 decided to maintain an independent profile by minimizing its dependence on and subservience to bargains made among the political parties. To achieve this, it had to increase its embeddedness, which helped it to enhance its bargaining power and to play the role of initiator before the 2019 local elections. Faced with opposition parties that had been weakened by their electoral defeats and thus lacked the confidence that they could win, C8 managed to put forward its own mayoral candidate, policy program and campaign team. The activists even managed to get the support of the opposition parties for their candidate and electoral program, despite the fact that the opposition parties had divided the districts of the capital among them, meaning that one of the parties had to give way to Mr. Pikó instead of fielding its own candidate. The campaign mode energized the organization, drawing in external experts as well as common citizens, who now form the backbone of C8. Despite its grassroots character, the election campaign was characterized by professionalism: the work was done according to plan, using experts and data. The collaborative drafting of the election program was also a way to increase embeddedness and legitimize C8 as a political actor. Surveys, door-to-door communication with 600 residents, focus groups and public participation served as a real driver for identifying and prioritizing the main issues of the campaign. This produced interesting results: although C8 concentrated on "non party-political" issues such as street cleaning, respondents also mentioned the biased local media as an important problem. The electoral program is still an important point of reference for the C8 members: those serving as committee members are referring to it as an explicit mandate that provides direction for their operation.

The campaign team, which was led by an activist closely associated with C8, also handled the campaign finances. It had little to spend on billboards or advertisements, although the opposition parties also contributed to the campaign. The activists conducted an intensive door-to-door campaign, in which they canvassed not only for Pikó, but also for the opposition candidates running for the city council. Between 150 and 200 activists were working on the campaign, many of whom represented "the cream" of local civil society, using innovative methods (e.g. street walking tours around the district), data analytics and creative community building. C8 also organized constant training for volunteers and activists, and unlike in a party campaign, made huge efforts to engage the volunteers, making them responsible for minor tasks and building up a sophisticated system for giving feedback. As such, C8 turned into a very professional campaign team that managed the strategic planning until election day. After October 2019, the electoral victory of Mr. Pikó and the opposition coalition that had assembled behind him created a dramatically new situation for C8.

Inside and outside the municipality

Interviewees working in municipal committees point out that party politicians often have a different mindset from civil society activists. As C8 is part of the ruling coalition, it has to be involved in the city-level coordination to keep things working, but it cannot vote. Collaboration on issues laid down in the policy program is difficult, since party politicians control the committees responsible for preparing the decisions. They are less motivated to work on strategic goals and long-term issues or to swiftly find solutions to problems raised by residents. They prefer visible, short-term results and avoid the political risks involved in tackling the most controversial issues of the municipal status quo. Acting as external members of these committees does not give C8 sufficient political weight, hence its position depends on the attitude and ability of the committee chairs, but also on the clout and respect accumulated by its members through their hard work and expert knowledge. To resolve this situation, C8 also participates in internal working groups, where strategy documents can be prepared more smoothly.

C8 and the district mayor continue to organize forums to collect and discuss the residents' concerns in every part of the district. While Pikó has distanced himself from C8, he is still a member. Moreover, several C8 members of the campaign team are now employees of the municipality, but as public servants, they have "removed their C8 badges," as one of the activists noted. If it voices any criticism, C8 risks weakening the position of the mayor and causing a political scandal that would be sensationalized by the right-wing media, which would delegitimize both the mayor and C8.

As one of the interviewees phrased it, C8 now faces the strategic dilemma of becoming either a watchdog or a puppy dog of the municipality. As a value-oriented civic group that wants to accomplish its program, C8 needs to energize the project development and policy preparation processes inside the City Hall, but it cannot give up its hard-won institutional position by simply walking out. The organization now has to come up with a strategy for how to resolve the crisis caused by this internal-external position. A long-term solution might be to aim for more influential positions within the municipality in order to recalibrate it into a more "civic" mode of operation. However, given the bipolar political situation, this endeavor would face resistance from the opposition parties. Despite the merits of the campaign run by C8, political representatives often call into question the legitimacy of the group's presence in the decision-making process. Another, more

targeted strategy for C8 would be to return to advocacy about winnable – and therefore galvanizing – local issues, which is something the organization is already doing with regard to a disputed investment project. In this context, it collaborates with another CSOs to oppose the real estate development project by means of community-building practices in the neighborhood. Such initiatives, however, necessarily interfere with the operation of the local government. To promote greater democracy and participation, C8 has become involved in several initiatives fronted by the municipality, including a local consultation about movie shoots, organizing forums and by conducting a survey. Many C8 members have been involved in voluntary assistance also during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the local government often keeps silent about their role, since this would "politicize" these activities. Doing voluntary work for the local government channels energy away from the daily activities of the organization. Many vocal residents see C8 as a privileged CSO or a "local party" that is gaining a lot from governing the municipality, which is not the case. C8 does not accept subsidies from the municipality and does not even rent any premises from it, but this is hard to explain to the public.

That being said, the participatory approach of C8 has been incorporated into the operation of the municipal government. A new department has been created, called the Office of Public Participation, in order to strengthen the involvement of the public in decision-making processes. The Office for Public Participation, backed by the mayor and legitimized by the participatory pledge contained in his electoral program, is formally a department of the municipality, with dedicated projects (participatory budgeting, forums, consultations, COVID-19 volunteering, etc.) But it follows a more comprehensive approach with a view to making the whole municipality more transparent, accessible and participatory. Through its involvement in preparing the decisions of the mayor's administration, the office cooperates with other departments, assisting them in two-way communication and consultation (e.g. participatory decision making about the local awards and decorations, summaries about council meetings in language that is easy to understand). It currently has a staff of five, among them a former C8 member and the former campaign manager. The office is responsible for programs in which many C8 members are involved as volunteers. However, the office is not engaged in any close and formal cooperation with C8; since it represents the municipality, not C8. This means, that C8 is not mentioned, even if the C8 members sometimes feel that they are doing the lion's share of the work. This is a strongly held view among the members of C8 – despite the fact that the Office for Public Participation also disposes of the assets and human resources of the municipality – which is largely invisible to CSOs outside the day-to-day work of the municipality.

Two possible solutions to this strategic dilemma have been proposed within C8: one is to behave like one of the local CSOs, carrying out collaborative projects together with them and with the municipality under the logos of all the participating organizations. In this scenario, the creation of a formal forum (CSO roundtable) would facilitate the coordination between the civil society actors. The other solution is to leave these tasks to the municipality, which should involve other volunteers and participants in its projects, while C8 would concentrate on its own projects and engage with the municipal authorities more at arm's length. In this second scenario, C8 would assume a privileged position in a political sense, setting it somewhat apart from other local CSOs. All our interviewees agreed that performing voluntary work for the municipality as if the campaign was still ongoing is not a sustainable option for C8, and that strategic decisions have to be made. C8 cannot afford to undercommunicate its work, since it is the lifeblood of its ability to compete politically. Some of its members want to deploy their work as an asset themselves, instead of allowing political actors to appropriate it. With no internal hierarchy or party discipline within C8, these tensions may lead to conflicts in the future.

C8's role dilemma is representative of a more systemic contradiction. In the overloaded Hungarian local government sphere, which has to counterbalance the government's antidemocratic centralization efforts, grassroots movements such as C8 that become involved in politics are faced with an environment that is dominated by political parties. They need to work with these parties, but should not necessarily merge into them. For a CSO, to gain influence over the institutions and processes of local government is a long learning process, in which an electoral victory is probably a unique situation. CSOs are able to develop their roles and strategies in a more organic manner while in opposition, by concentrating on specific issues and constituencies. If they aim to act as political representatives at the local level, they cannot circumvent the electoral game altogether, which requires not only the strength of a social movement, but a mature strategy and political agenda. Once they enter politics, they are responsible not only to their autonomous membership, but also to voters, which requires them to mediate between various interests and needs, as well as to bear responsibility for the static system they are trying to improve.

Civic initiatives are able to legitimately criticize the shortcomings of partisan local politics (instructions and obligation coming from above instead of being embedded locally), and a pattern has emerged by which this partisan logic is slowly being dissolved and domesticated by localist impulses. A *Hungarian study* of CSOs actively involved in the 2019 local elections, which was conducted simultaneously with ours, highlighted similar experiences. The future of C8's municipalist project depends on how much institutional change it can achieve within the local government, and how much leverage it can create not only for itself, but also for other local stakeholders. Stronger collaboration between such movements is very important to enable them to learn from each other, especially regarding their experience of pre- and post-election negotiations, which may improve their starting position as well as the intra-municipal setting for achieving their goals.

Case study 3

# "From the street to housing" in Kőbánya: an unlikely collaboration

Interviewees

Géza Mustó | Deputy Mayor of Kőbánya (left-liberal, Democratic Coalition, 2019-) currently responsible for housing
Tibor Weeber | Deputy Mayor of Kőbánya (right-wing, Fidesz, 2010-) previously responsible for housing
Vera Kovács | Founder of Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület ("From the street to housing," ULE)

The social and political context
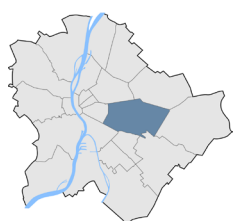
Kőbánya (the 10th district of Budapest) is an outer district of the city, one of the largest by area, with many brownfield sites and a population of 78,000 inhabitants. There is a significant Roma (Gypsy) presence, generally evenly distributed over the entire district. Recently, a small but visible Chinese community has also emerged. The Kőbánya municipal council was dominated by the Socialist Party between 1990 and 2010, when the right-wing governing party Fidesz took control of the municipality. Since 2019, the opposition coalition has the same number of votes in the municipal council as Fidesz, which necessitates cooperation between the two camps. For this reason, the Fidesz mayor has appointed two deputy mayors, one from Fidesz and one from the opposition.

Map source: Wikipedia

Social housing-related tasks are delegated to local governments (in Budapest, this is a district-level function). The most important of these tasks are the regulation and management of local public housing, decisions on the provision of housing benefits, and debt management within the framework of the so-called "settlement benefit" (the national normative housing benefit – home maintenance support – was abolished in 2015). It is therefore an important battleground for the housing movement to push local governments toward a more equitable and progressive public policy. But the resources disbursed by local governments for improving affordability and reducing indebtedness have decreased drastically. Housing problems more likely to be experienced by individuals with the lowest socioeconomic status are thus not being addressed by means of adequate policy responses: for example, there is a lack of social housing and policy programs to avoid homelessness. Nevertheless, the provision of social housing and the allocation of housing benefits are the responsibility of local governments, which leads to a highly fragmented system in terms of the eligibility criteria and the quality/level of the actual services provided in different parts of the city. It also makes innovative NGO-municipal cooperation crucial, since without social programs, social housing programs end up in tension.

For the collaboration presented in this case study, the civil society situation of Kőbánya is less relevant, since Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület (ULE) is not a local grassroots organization, although its activities involve the participation of residents. In terms of context, it is more important to understand the social tensions related to the housing crisis in Budapest, the problem of homelessness, ULE's connection to the housing movement, and the specific problems that the district of Kőbánya faces in this regard. These social problems are indifferent to the borders of the city districts. So far, the Municipality of Budapest has been unable to solve the collective action problems originating from the fact that the districts have incentives not to invest in social protection and housing but to push the burden onto the shoulders of other districts. In the last few years, homelessness, social housing, but also the drug-related problems of specific neighborhoods have risen to the top of the political agenda. There was a strong public demand for local politicians to "restore public order," which resonated with both left-wing and right-wing parties. During our interview with the two deputy mayors from different parties, they shared very similar ideas about housing policies. From time to time, the local government has attempted to demolish local government-owned residential buildings inhabited by poor families or to eliminate "irregularities" (dispossess notices, demolishing the shacks of homeless people). This went hand in hand with anti-homeless regulations and rhetoric at the city and national level. But this is only one side of the story. According to the deputy mayors, the municipality of Kőbánya has invested a lot of effort into improving the social infrastructure for the homeless (which is more developed than in other districts), creating housing opportunities and pursuing innovative approaches to housing, for example the Lélek House (a state-funded program), which helps 30 formerly homeless people to reintegrate into society through social work methods. ULE's "housing first" program is also one of these examples.

The ongoing housing crisis in Budapest has contributed to a strong housing movement. Civil society organization (CSOs) that have been active in taking care of the homeless since the 1989 regime change laid the foundations of the socio-political infrastructure in this field. Local experiments with "housing first" projects (such as ULE) started only in the late 2000s. They involve direct action to provide homes for a small number of specific homeless individuals and can also be understood as a political statement to demonstrate that this can be done. This shift brings to the fore the problem of social participation, emphasizing citizen rights over charity / social needs and confronting the symbolic and social exclusion from housing that is considered to be normal. ULE grew out of the local fight of "A Város Mindenkié" (*The City is for Everyone*, AVM) against the demolition of self-built shacks in 2012. AVM, an NGO founded in 2009, advocates for housing rights and comprises activists from both homeless and middle-class (secure housing) backgrounds. AVM managed to stop the forced evictions and to convince the local authorities to provide vacant, dilapidated public housing units that the group then renovates (through donations and volunteer work) to house some of the shack dwellers. Later, activists involved in these activities formed the ULE association. Besides exporting this model to other localities, the association also implements additional innovative local projects to provide affordable housing to formerly homeless people. ULE is part of a loose network that grew out of the AVM housing movement, with a focus on different areas, such as Utcajogász (Street Lawyers, which provides legal aid) or Közélet Iskolája (the School of Public Life, which provides training for activists). It is thus important to see ULE (which shares the same values as other CSOs) not just as an individual organization that promotes a housing policy program, but also as an actor within the wider housing movement that has opted for a strategy of cooperation with local governments, instead of a strategy based on confrontation and advocacy against anti-homeless measures.

From the Street to Housing

Since 2012, ULE's mission is to help the largest possible number of rough sleepers to move into affordable rental housing and to push for the provision of affordable housing to become the institutional, local or national policy for tackling homelessness. This mission is not directly related to municipal housing policies, but social housing is the most important tool for achieving it. Apart from overseeing the management of a municipal housing stock, ULE has also set up a rental agency, to integrate privately-owned vacant housing into the provision of affordable housing. It has also installed second-hand mobile homes on lots it has either purchased or for which it has been granted right of use. This enables supporters of such "private sector-oriented" programs to invest in a socially sensitive manner, with a return on investment over time. ULE differentiates itself from the large NGOs (such as the Maltese Charity Service or the Red Cross) maintaining homeless shelters – which do not offer real solutions to the root causes of homelessness – but also from charity organizations that contribute resources but lack a professional approach to social work. ULE organizes intensive social work for its program participants. As the goal is to help clients retain their housing in the long run, the organization also identifies employment opportunities, and in some cases even offers jobs to tenants, so that they can cover their bills on time.

ULE's program in Kőbánya is based on an innovative idea: to renovate vacant, run-down municipal apartments with the help of volunteers and the participation of the homeless families who are going to inhabit them. For rough sleepers living in self-built shacks, institutional care (mass homeless shelters) often means a step back, as people living in self-built dwellings who are managing their own household would not be able to keep most of their belongings if they moved to a shelter; nor would they be able to maintain their household composition, as couples cannot move into the same room and potentially not even into the same institution. Members of the target group have no chance of ever obtaining long-term, sustainable individual housing because most of the relevant municipal decrees stipulate that homeless persons are ineligible for municipal rental housing or the state-funded Lélek program if they cannot demonstrate that they were residents of the district for the five years before they lost their housing. The local governments own low-quality housing stock with many uninhabitable apartments, which they have trouble utilizing, while ULE's program provides voluntary resources for renovating and leasing out these apartments to needy people.

The group that became ULE formed during the protests against the evictions from the Terebess forest. With the active participation of stakeholders and the public, the illegal demolition plans were stopped. In the meantime, members of the group and stakeholders (homeless people in need of housing) approached all local government actors – notaries, mayors and senior municipal department staff – by letter and telephone, until negotiations could be initiated to resolve the crisis. During this process, stakeholders and district decision makers entered into talks. In the summer of 2012, the district's deputy mayor for social affairs promised that – despite the final decision to evacuate the area – no shack would be demolished until its inhabitants managed to find a suitable place to move. AVM held residential rallies in the forest to inform the people living there about their rights and the possibilities for moving out. In the end, with the help of local social workers, most of the shack dwellers received acceptable accommodation outside the forest, but the inhabitants of five of the shacks were still unable to move out. Residents of four of the five shacks wanted to get a rental apartment, and in the spring of 2013, four people (two couples) from two households were finally able to move into municipal rental housing. The consultation with the municipality took a very long time, involving both lawyers and other professionals, but the municipality also had to go through a lot of issues despite eventually being receptive to the idea. The homeless residents, who later became members of ULE, finally agreed with the municipality: the two couples would be able to move into the social rental housing that they would renovate (the activists accompanied the future tenants to the negotiations with the municipality). The detailed terms of the move were set out in a written agreement with the municipality. For the municipality, the most important condition for the move was that the people concerned had an officially verifiable income. As participants in the program, the municipality would have preferred couples and households with more than one person, but this did not materialize in the end. Unlike other programs, local residence (on paper) is not one of the criteria for eligibility. A homeless

member of AVM taught the basics of masonry to the middle-class volunteers who were helping with the renovation. This period also saw the formal establishment of ULE, which later became a partner of the municipality and today continues the program by adding two extra apartments every year. ULE – at the beginning working together with other larger NGOs, such as Habitat – brought together the most important players that had already been involved in the process and transformed itself into a legal service provider, which is not the case with AVM.

Collaboration with the local government: lessons to be learned

While the relationship between Kőbánya and the AVM advocacy group is unique and delicate, ULE has managed to achieve a stable collaboration thanks to the results of the program, the openness of both sides to negotiation, and good working relationship of the people involved. However, this does not automatically translate into good cooperation in other cases in which AVM and the district authorities of Kőbánya are involved – and in general, AVM has had a bad reputation among municipalities (those governed by the right in particular) as a radical advocacy group. According to the two deputy mayors, the municipality acts based on information about the financial situation of tenants that is classified and cannot be revealed to a third party, while protesters often lack knowledge of such factors. This conflict also affected the establishment of the cooperation with ULE, but by now, both sides are working together based on mutual trust and pragmatism about the program. In this case, there is no information asymmetry between the two parties, since ULE represents the tenants. While the policy agendas they pursue are very different, both sides agree that the present system of social service provision and the relevant legislation are inadequate. From a political perspective, the collaboration with ULE contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the housing situation instead of building up a false image of the municipality as an omnipotent actor that should be shamed for incompetence and inaction. ULE strictly limits its advocacy work to its direct field of operation (though it did participate in the protests against the demolition of the social housing bloc mentioned earlier). However, the partnership roles can be separated from such activities. The two deputy mayors mention that they would like to see more NGO-municipal cooperation to lobby for reform of the relevant national legislation.

ULE also entered into collaboration with several other districts of Budapest, but these projects are not of a comparable size to the one in Kőbánya (where 17 of ULE's 22 apartments are located). After the "symbolic" gesture of initiating the cooperation, and the renovation of the first apartments, these collaborations failed to advance. The collaboration with non-political municipal institutions (the trusts responsible for social housing) was difficult, but the real reason for the stagnation never became clear. In the case of Zugló (the 14th district), the planned project caused political turmoil because ULE's political ally was not able to convince the majority of the district council members to support the project. In the other districts, the collaboration was not underpinned by the kind of bottom-up social participation that took place in Kőbánya – these projects either started as individual interventions or upon the invitation of politicians. ULE's housing agency can be seen as a response to these difficulties. Building cooperation with the local government required a lot of energy because of the long time it took the organization to get the decision makers to understand the project and to break down their initial resistance, which originated from political prejudice and a lack of information. CSOs also need to understand the political logic and the power fields in which they operate. Political agreements are often invisible to civil society initiatives, and according to the interviewee form ULE, their only option is to be very determined and move forward. Long-term cooperation, however, cannot be based solely on pressure – both sides have to reach a common understanding. The positive aspect of the right-wing authorities in Kőbánya was their clear and open approach toward making decisions in this area (which often clashed with ULE's values) instead of playing shady political games. For ULE, this pilot project continues, but the real goal was not to do it on a large scale, but to elaborate and document it so that local governments could apply it on their own. This successful collaboration played an important role in highlighting the importance of the "housing first" approach over the "law and order" anti-homeless rhetoric, but to achieve systematic change, the foundation of the system needs to be changed. Currently, social housing is not an end in itself for local governments, but (for financial and regulatory reasons) only a small-scale tool for creating a way out of homelessness – paradoxically, however, without large-scale changes in social policy, the people living in social housing are unable to ever leave it. From the perspective of local governments, this is thus a dead-end both in terms of asset management and social policy, since one district cannot solve the problem of housing poverty and homelessness on its own. This unlikely collaboration contributes not only to greater dignity for the people it supports directly, but also to the advocacy work for reforming the system, for which it could serve as a model. Structural problems remain invisible if a local government only follows the beaten track and does not embrace alternative approaches. Only with a focus on long-term goals and values can such unlikely collaboration work. If the local government does not want to dominate the field, and civil society initiatives are given autonomy to create solutions, they will not adopt a confrontational attitude based only on exerting direct influence on political processes while viewing local politics as the enemy. Making such initiatives dependent on progressive political allies is difficult if systemic factors stand in their way, and thus leads to disappointment. Collaborations such as this one are important experiments that can facilitate comparisons between different approaches, identify practical issues that have to be solved and help civil society initiatives to professionalize and to craft realistic solutions – without betraying their original values or being coopted by politics.
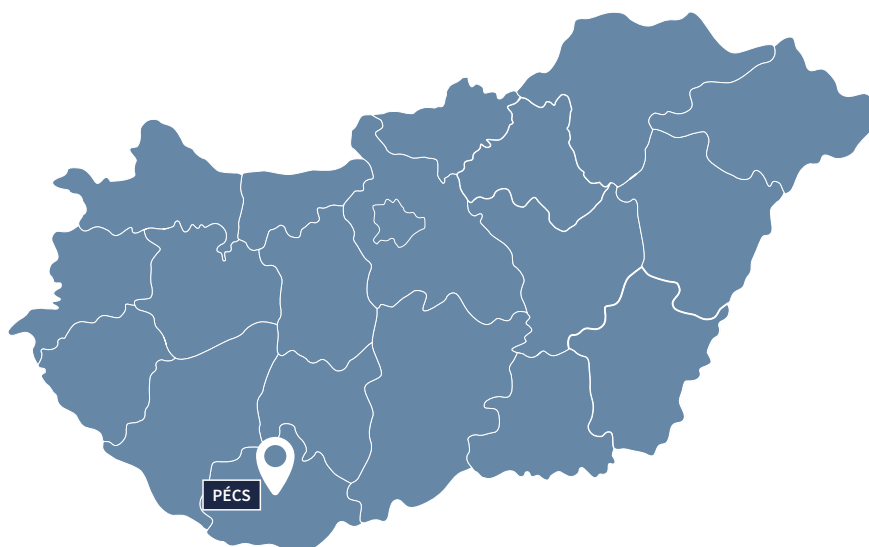
Case study 4
Pécs: developing a social program for the city

Interviewees

Fanni Aradi | Member/Founder of AVM Pécs (A Város Mindenkié – The City is for Everyone)
Szilvia Bognár | Deputy Mayor for Social Affairs and Health
Ildikó Bokrétás | Member of EEA (Emberség Erejével Alapítvány – The Power of Humanity Foundation)

The city and its context

Pécs is a second-tier city in Southern Hungary close to the Croatian border and the fifth largest municipality in the country. A former trading and mining town, it is today mostly known as a university city.

In 2010, Pécs was selected to become the European Capital of Culture (ECC), as a result of which parts of the historical center were renovated and new cultural facilities were built, including a concert hall, a library, and a new cultural quarter. As with most large-scale urban developments, the ECC heritage left the city with high maintenance costs for the cultural quarter that consume a significant portion of its budget.

In Pécs, Green and environmental civil society organizations grew stronger during the 2000s, when a series of demonstrations were held against the building of a NATO military radar on a nearby mountain, endangering the natural habitat. These organizations later served as the basis for a growing network of civil society initiatives that organized demonstrations during the 2010s, consisting mainly of student protests against the restructuring of the educational system (2012-2014), and anti-government protests after the government attacks against foreign-funded NGOs had started (2014-2016).[19]

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19 As an illustrative example, in December 2017, the General Assembly of Pécs protested against George Soros and adopted a resolution that asked citizens not to provide his "campaign center" with an office. A Fidesz MP highlighted that this referred, in particular, to Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (the Power of Humanity Foundation, EEA), which, he argued, not only sought to interfere in the 2018 elections but also supported migration. EEA initiated a civil proceeding against the mayor and the local government of Pécs for putting pressure on local businesses not provide it with office space, but only partially won the case in May 2019.

How it started: the prelude for solidarity in action

The Pécs subsidiary of A Város Mindenkié (AVM, which was originally formed and based in Budapest) was created as a reaction to a September 2014 ordinance that criminalized homelessness in the city's downtown and former ECC areas. Initially, an informal Facebook group served as the communication channel for activists and civil society organizations that had already been active in student and anti-government protests. To make the organization more formal than a mere social media group, AVM Pécs was established through the collaboration of a community organizer, funded by the Civil College Foundation (CKA, a nationwide adult education organization for community development) and the Open Society Foundation. AVM Pécs was officially founded in December 2015, and since 2016 has operated as a branch of the Budapest-based activist group. What makes AVM stand out is that consists of a mixed group of middle-class activists and vulnerable citizens who are directly affected by the issues it tackles. It mostly focuses on advocacy, informing citizens, raising awareness, organizing events and offering help to vulnerable groups, as well as seeking collaboration with other civil society organizations (CSOs) and local governments, especially in the field of housing policies.

As AVM Pécs is an informal group, it does not have the legal basis to apply for grants and funding, hence it relies mostly on donations, even though its activities are usually low-cost. To counterbalance its lack of financial resources, it maintains a close interaction with Budapest-based activist groups, such as AVM or Közélet Iskolája[20] and Utcajogász.[21] In addition, if often works together with local organizations such as Élmény Tár Tanoda[22] and Támasz Alapítvány.[23]

One of AVM's closest collaborators is Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (the Power of Humanity Foundation, EEA) which was founded in 2006 and focuses on human rights development. Both organizations run several programs together. Erősödő Civil Közösségek (Strengthening Civil Communities, ECK) is one of the main programs that develops civil society networks in the region, financed by funds from the Open Society Institute (OSI). Sometimes EEA run campaigns, which the previous local government tried to delegitimize through political attacks in media outlets. For instance, the Élmény Tár Tanoda program does not receive any funds from the state, partly because of the government's hostile approach towards organizations that receive foreign funding.

EEA's goal is to develop civil society networks in the region. The OSI funds were useful to start investing in this goal, as our interviewees from EEA described the situation as much worse in neighboring cities such as Kaposvár or Szekszárd, in the sense that there are very few active CSOs. EEA mostly collaborate with newer CSOs, not the "traditional ones," as Ildikó Bokrétás of EEA explains. In general, EEA have a good relationship with all civil society organizations, but with the "newer ones" they formulate joint strategies and engage in more frequent interaction, sometimes even on a daily basis. To foster the creation of a strong civil network, they run a co-working space for various civil society organizations, which often results in joint programs and common goals and demands.

Forming an informal working group

In 2018, a sudden change in the housing ordinance brought together several civil society actors and municipal institutions: to avoid the immediate eviction of 106 people from their homes, family support services and CSOs started to elaborate a package of proposals for the new housing ordinance. They also set up a temporary contract with the help of a social worker to manage the debt of the households in question. AVM was invited to join by the Hungarian Maltese Charity Organization,[24] and later, in May of the same year, an informal housing working group was formed with the local government, to formulate a unified civil society-social services standpoint.

At one point, the representative who linked the working group to the municipality suddenly disappeared, no decision was made, the communication channels were closed, and the cooperation was phased out in January 2019. The working group had met regularly, at least once a month, and completed a working paper that eventually never reached the local government's desk. The participants included CSOs and, from the official side, the housing department together with the housing management department dealing with debt and financial matters.

In October 2019, after the municipal elections, an oppositional coalition took over the leadership of the city, which led to a reshuffle of the housing-related municipal institutions, forcing CSOs to rebuild their connections with new institutional actors. As part of its campaign, the opposition promised a more peaceful and inclusive relationship with CSOs. Nevertheless, the pace of change was slow and the process was marked by uncertainty.

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20 *School of Public Life*, a community-based training, research and development center that aims to promote democratic culture in Hungary by improving the citizenship skills of people living in social exclusion, and by supporting social movements through participatory and community-based research.
21 *Streetlawyer Association*, a human rights NGO that seeks to enforce the rights and interests of homeless people and people living in housing poverty.
22 *Study Hall*, a Pécs-based NGO that focuses on social inclusion and and creates learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
23 A foundation that assists homeless people by providing institutional care.
24 One of Hungary's largest charity organizations, which has collaborations with local governments across the country, usually through formal partnerships for carrying out services and programs.

AVM and EEA's strongest tie to the local government was the deputy mayor for social affairs and health, who offered a deeper insight (compared to the former leadership) into the political processes inside City Hall and played an active role in pushing through participatory mechanisms. Consequently, civic groups have also been seeking more intense ways of cooperation with the new local government. The goal was to revitalize the previous informal housing working group and to work together with the public welfare committee. Just when the new processes of participation were meant to be established, the meetings became impossible to sustain due to the coronavirus pandemic, and had to be put on hold in March 2020.

Managing emergency social services for vulnerable groups

Nevertheless, during the months of March and April, the deputy mayor continued the collaboration and meetings with CSOs, to develop an action plan for countering the negative effects of COVID-19. The proposal included the fields of education, housing, homelessness, human resource regrouping and healthcare, and strictly targeted people on a needs basis (especially if they had been excluded from other existing social welfare services), coupled with the coordination of donations and the inclusion of community centers to help families living in segregated areas. A comprehensive proposal was created, based on statistics, research-based recommendations and the relevant decrees and regulations, with the aim of submitting to the mayor for his approval.

Instead, in April, the mayor announced, via an online information session that he organized to keep in contact with residents and civil society, that a "social welfare system 2.0" program had been developed. This happened without the input of the original CSOs and took them by surprise. The deputy mayor was also left out of the decision-making process, and the details of the program were as yet unknown to the public.

The CSOs were mostly critical of the new program, since it was not based on any prior known expert report. Instead of focusing on the most vulnerable groups, according to our respondents, the local government promoted a support service for the elderly during the pandemic, where volunteers helped pensioners with buying groceries or medicine and distributing masks. AVM and EEA have been ambivalent towards the program because it has been over-advertised and has so far only helped middle-class citizens, without offering any solutions for assisting marginalized people and those living in poverty. Meanwhile, the local government pushed this initiative as its main vehicle for including civil society actors in tackling the corollaries of the coronavirus.

Even though the deputy mayor's working group had put together an action plan with specific practical suggestions, the mayor asked an independent expert group to evaluate the proposals, where the "jury" consisted of several local government employees, such as the head of a children's nursery, the director of family support and the head of the local government's human resources office. In practice, after four weeks of collaboration, the deputy mayor and the civil society groups that had participated in the meetings with her were sidestepped, as the expert group appointed by the mayor started to work on its own program. Nevertheless, the deputy mayor's working group continued to develop its action plan. In April 2020, it finished the proposal, but the mayor did not intend to take action based on its suggestions. He failed to show any real interest in implementing the measures of the program and had another agenda, according to our interviewees. While during the lockdown, the deputy mayor's group had continued to amend parts of the action plan, the mayor's office put the proposal on hold.

The deputy mayor appointed an independent expert group to evaluate the proposal of the CSO sector, which took away the deputy mayor's decision-making role. This created uncertainty inside the local government, and it was not clear anymore who was in charge. In the end, the experts did not take the action plan that had been developed into consideration. They expressed concerns and remained skeptical about the proposed measures, postponing the implementation process, which in their view needed further elaboration. At that point, it became clear for the civil society participants that the local government intended to focus on an institution-based expansion of social services, without the active involvement of CSOs. As our interviewees interpreted it, this sent an important message: that the local government believes in the development of the institutional system, and not in the inclusion of civil society groups. In the end, the pandemic resulted in hierarchic decision making instead of collaboration. Politicians jumped on the issue and took decisions without the involvement of CSOs, convinced that they "know how to manage the city," as Ildikó Bokrétás of EEA ironically notes. Meanwhile, the deputy mayor took a more oppositional role. AVM decided to return to a more confrontational stance and to criticize the local government from the outside. As Fanni Aradi of AVM explains, she and the other activists had expected that the collaboration would not go smoothly and that they would have to argue a lot, but what little hope they had faded away with the COVID-19 events.

Even though the collaboration has come to a temporary stop, the preparation of the action plan contributed to a few social programs that benefited people in need, such as one-time support for citizens who lost their job and the option to defer rent payments. Although these one-off forms of supports are essential for families in need, the local government did not touch upon any of the structural problems. The power struggle among CSOs and the local government continued, including the internal fragmentation of the local government and the question of which political alliances to make. However, the working group continues its work with the deputy mayor even in spite of the coronavirus emergency, seeking solutions that could have a more long-lasting effect.

Obstacles and how to make it work

CSOs are in a sensitive position when it comes to political issues. Despite the fact that mainstream media outlets portray them as in opposition to the central government (and hence to the former political leaders of the city), they often find themselves criticizing both sides of the political spectrum – and acting as the "opposition that criticizes the opposition" is a delicate role to play. As Fanni Aradi of AVM explains, "it is a more exciting time compared to the previous political leadership. The current one is sensitive to criticism coming from CSOs, but they still don't treat civil society any better." While the deputy mayor is considered to be on the side of the CSOs within the local government, the mayor does not like to delegate decisions, instead handing down instructions and sustaining a hierarchic process of decision-making.

Another issue regarding the dynamics of collaboration is the divide among the civil sphere, where "old" actors are institutionally better embedded, and "new" ones are typically more critical groups that are excluded from collaborative practices and secure funding opportunities. Támasz Alapítvány and the Maltese Charity Service are well embedded in institutional networks, but they are often less critical towards the local government and also tend to maintain a looser contact with more critical CSOs. Moreover, unequal access to local government and funding results in the taming of collaborative civil society actors, causing them to opt for sustaining aid-based support schemes instead of empowering disadvantaged groups. In other words, these institutionalized CSOs find it more effective to be included in bureaucratic processes, even at the expense of civil society solidarity, as one interviewee explained. Meanwhile, networking, bottom-up initiatives and supporting stronger collaboration are much more typical of the new types of organization. They do not act independently of each other but come up with a strategy for a more concerted approach to bringing back solidarity. Therefore, it would be a task for the local government to develop an environment where both institutionalized and informal civil society groups can express their ideas and share their knowledge.

Poland

GDAŃSK

OLSZTYN

TORUŃ

GORZÓW WIELKOPOLSKI

KALISZ

ŁÓDŹ

LUBARTÓW

LUBLIN

GLIWICE

DĄBROWA GÓRNICZA

KĘDZIERZYN KOŹLE

KATOWICE

Sites where interviews
were conducted

Country chapter
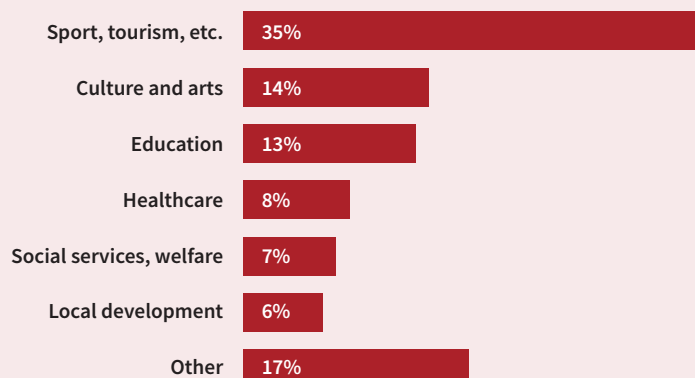# The end of the partnership model?
Collaboration between non-governmental organizations and local governments in Poland

Civil society in Poland

According to a study conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association, in 2018 there were 143,000 registered organizations (associations and foundations) in Poland. Klon/Jawor estimates that about 65% of these NGOs are active (approximately 80,000 organizations, excluding voluntary fire brigades).

The main field of non-governmental activity is to supplement the services provided by the state: "NGOs mainly deal with issues where the Polish state is ineffective," argues Andrzej Bukowski, Professor of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The majority of NGOs promote physical culture and popularize sports, recreation, and tourism. This is followed by organizations that are active in the fields of culture and the arts as well as education (Table 1). Research shows that there are only a few organizations that deal with local development, social participation, and transparency.

Table 1. The focus of NGOs in Poland.

Field	Percentage
Sport, tourism, etc.	35%
Culture and arts	14%
Education	13%
Healthcare	8%
Social services, welfare	7%
Local development	6%
Other	17%

Source: Charycka, B., Gumkowska, M. (2018). *The capacity of NGOs in Poland – Key Facts.* Warsaw: Klon/Jawor Association.

Unfortunately, as Agnieszka Bejma (2016) writes in her article on the development of civil society in Poland after World War II, "the dynamic development of civil society institutions is not accompanied by an increase in social involvement. Although voluntary activity is gaining greater popularity from year to year, still only a small percentage of Poles are involved in the activities of NGOs" (p. 217). On average, NGOs have 30 members, of whom only ten tend to be active. According to the Public Opinion Research Center (2018), two-thirds of Poles do not participate in civic organizations. In 2017, one in six adult Poles (16%) were involved in work for the benefit of either their community or a CSO.

Political and legal context

The development and growth of the non-governmental sector in Poland was shaped by the political transformation in 1989. After the communist government fell, Poland adopted several laws introducing decentralization and the legal basis for the operation of civil society organizations (CSOs). **Poland's local governmental structure was created in 1990.** The reform assigned a number of tasks that were previously the prerogative of the central government to the municipalities and gave them relative autonomy in carrying them out. Local governments have several revenue-raising powers and can collect real estate as well as local taxes. Most interactions between public administrations and citizens take place at the local government level. According to Andrzej Bukowski, the 1990 Act on Municipal Government (OJ 1990, No. 16, item 95), was "one of the best results of the political breakthrough."

Since then, Poland has been one of the most decentralized states in Europe where civil society is perceived as an indispensable element of democracy. Since 1989, CSOs in Poland are governed by the Act of 7 April 1989 on Associations (OJ 1989, No. 20, item 104, as amended). In the early 1990s, a large increase in the emergence of new organizations could be observed, given that Poland's transition to a market democracy "released a lot of social energy. There was an explosion, an eruption of the third sector," as Bukowski explains.

Another turning point in the formation of CSOs in Poland was the **adoption of the Law on Public Benefit and Volunteerism by the Polish parliament** (OJ 2003, No. 96, item 873, as amended) in 2003. "It has been called the constitution of the third sector," Bukowski notes. It introduced the definition of an NGO into the legal system, provided the basis for financing NGOs, and formulated guidelines for the relations between non-profit organizations and the public authorities. In short, it "civilized the relations of the local government and public administration with non-governmental organizations," as Tomasz Schimanek, an expert from the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland, says.

As a result of this law, the local government is obliged to launch formal procedures of collaboration with non-governmental organizations. For example, it is required to establish, at the request of such organizations, a consultative and advisory body of civic dialogue known as a Public Benefit Works Council. The Law on Public Benefit and Volunteerism "was promoted and supported by the Ministry […]. It contributed to the fact that many local governments began to open themselves to cooperation. It empowered NGOs and turned them into real partners for dialog," explains Schimanek. Moreover, there are other regulations that affect the operations of NGOs. For example, **the Act on Access to Public Information** (OJ 2001, No. 111, item 1198), which ensures free access to and the re-use of public information held by the public authorities, is especially important for watchdog organizations.

However, despite the legal possibilities, much of the collaboration between local governments and NGOs is based almost exclusively on financial aspects, as Stanisław Mocek (2010) has shown. Only a minority of local governments and NGOs are engaged in non-financial cooperation, understood as "an area of civil dialog, within which non-governmental and public organizations exchange information and opinions or build advisory, initiative and consultation teams" (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2011, p. 25).

Collaborations are therefore limited to entrusting organizations with public tasks or awarding subsidies or grants. Consequently, this kind of cooperation reproduces the hierarchical relationship between the two types of entities and places CSOs in a dominated position (Mocek, 2010). The local government remains the ordering party, while CSOs play the role of contractor whose activities need to be controlled. This is a far cry from partnership understood as a model where both parties are equal partners in the decision-making process. Partnership should also involve a mutual understanding of the goals and responsibilities, a shared culture of cooperation based on trust and an understanding each other's expectations and values (ibid.), all of which is lacking in a purely financial exchange.

At the same time, the collaboration between NGOs and local government is gaining in importance and is being promoted in many publications. Therefore, as Ewa Bogacz-Wojtanowska (2011) points out, many local governments declare that they promote partnership models of collaboration, while in reality this is not the case. Birkenhoff (2002, p. 98), quoted by Bogacz-Wojtanowska, calls such behavior "the rhetoric of partnership." Currently, many municipalities have designated officials who are responsible for contacts with NGOs, and the local authorities maintain NGO registers, create social dialog committees, and so on. However, the question is to what extent such institutional activities produce collaborations in the manner of a true partnership.

Background of the study

In our study, we decided to focus on non-governmental organizations that support transparency, promote open data, and enhance social participation. We tried to identify and understand the best practices for non-financial collaboration between NGOs and local governments. In doing so, our aim was to analyze the most important challenges and preconditions for the implementation of successful cooperation. We also asked our interviewees about the nature of their collaboration with the authorities. Is it democratic and based on the principles of partnership? Does it empower citizens or simply serve to legitimize those in power?

During our research, we carried out 21 in-depth interviews with three different groups of people: experts (2 interviews), representatives of non-governmental organizations (14 interviews) and local government officials (5 interviews) in different cities across Poland (Figure 1) who are involved in collaborations. We selected initiatives from cities with a population of more than 10,000 inhabitants. The capital city of Poland, Warsaw, was excluded from our study. We selected the respondents by means of purposive and snowball sampling. We contacted CSOs via national umbrella organizations such as the Urban Movements Congress. After the interviews, we asked the NGOs to suggest an official responsible for collaboration whom we might interview. Unfortunately, not every official agreed to be interviewed. Very quickly, we discovered that collaboration can take various forms and is not limited to clear-cut partnership relations. Based on our interviews, we assembled four case studies that demonstrate the patterns of collaboration between local government and NGOs. First, **NGOs can decide to work for the municipality and collaborate with the local government from the inside**. This is the case in the city of Dąbrowa Górnicza (Case Study 1), where representatives of the local urban movement, the Dąbrowska Initiative, ran for jobs in the municipality. Members of the association joined the mayor's office as officials in charge of civil society matters (Piotr Drygała) and collaboration with NGOs (Magdalena Mike). Eventually, the founder of the association also became the city's mayor.

Secondly, **NGOs can form a political opposition and try to collaborate with the local government as political actors** (Case Study 2). In Gorzów Wielkopolski, the People for the City movement won the elections in 2014. Currently, its representatives, among them Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz, act as opposition politicians in the city council. This political involvement has led to successful collaborations, for example with the Department of Social Consultations and Revitalization of the city of Gorzów Wielkopolski. However, not every instance of collaboration proceeds in a conflict-free manner. NGOs may be perceived as political competition, and the municipality may thus look at them through the prism of politics. **Unsuccessful joint projects with the local administration may also lead an organization to move its activities elsewhere** (Case Study 3). After several failed collaborations, the Fix Your City Foundation and the Sustainable Development Workshop decided to implement their ideas outside their municipality of origin.

Finally, there is also the question as to what counts as collaboration. **Watchdog and whistleblower organizations do not formally collaborate with local governments** (Case Study 4). They perceive themselves as organizations that are independent, and which can therefore monitor the local authorities' activities. However, they do take part in meetings, provide advice, and influence local governments

in other ways. They effect change and exert pressure on local authorities. This perspective corresponds with the observations of Donatella Della Porta (2006), a researcher of social movements: "While the capacity of social movements for the realization of their general aims has been considered low, they are seen as more effective in the importation of new issues into public debate, or thematization" (p. 232). Sylwia Kowalska, a member of the Time for Citizens movement from Toruń, agrees: "In my opinion, the language we used and the issues we pointed out began to be mentioned more often by the local authorities. This can be considered a success. If you talk about something and then it happens or is implemented, you can be happy about it, because it represents a real change."

Table 2. Case studies.

No.	Case study	Organizations
1	Working for local government	Dąbrowska Initiative, Dąbrowa Górnicza
2	NGOs as opposition in the city council	People for the City, Gorzów Wielkopolski
3	Providing expert knowledge from outside local government	Fix Your City Foundation, Katowice; Sustainable Development Workshop, Toruń
4	Influencing local government as a watchdog	Civic City, Lubartów; Freedom Foundation, Lublin; Kalisz City Initiative; To Know More, Kędzierzyn Koźle

The end of the partnership model?

What, then, makes the partnership model difficult to implement in Poland? According to the majority of respondents, this problem may be related to the specific political culture in Poland. "Political culture determines the totality of values, norms, and patterns of behavior fixed in consciousness of subjects taking part in political actions" (Dutkiewicz, 2013, p. 62). The political culture of Polish society influences the shape of collaboration between local governments and NGOs. According to Pawel Kubicki (2011), most Polish cities are deeply rooted in their 19th century heritage; in cities, "the patterns of quasi-noble (pathologically understood as 'golden liberty') and peasant culture (a lack of understanding for values broader than one's own family and home) persisted. As a result, cities were perceived in terms of the sum of private property, rather than the common good" (p. 224).

During our interviews, the NGO representatives thus frequently mention that local authorities treat the municipality "as their own kingdom" and do not want to share their tasks with any other entities. Alina Czyżewska, an activist from the Citizen Network Watchdog Poland and the People for the City movement from Gorzów Wielkopolski, say this outright: "The mayor often follows a feudal line of thinking: that the inhabitants are his inhabitants, that this is his commune, his municipality, his village, and he is the king who neither has to confess to anyone nor explain anything to anyone." This opinion is shared by both Kamil Nowak from the To Know More Foundation from Kędzierzyn-Koźle, and Krzysztof Kowalik and Krzysztof Jakubowski, representatives of the Freedom Foundation from Lublin (Case Study 4). The latter notes that "power in Poland is treated as 'being the king.' It is not about public service but about being a king – therefore this power cannot be shared." The situation can change if the mayor does not have a majority in the city council, when NGOs form a political movement with its own councilors (Case Study 2), or when NGO representatives decide to work for the municipality and try to effect change from the inside (Case Study 1)

At the same time, CSOs draw attention to overly complicated procedures at the level of the municipality, which they often associate with attempts to restrict their freedom of action. On account of this bureaucracy, it is often difficult to introduce changes and to offer solutions. According to Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs from the Civic City Lubartów, "every change is met with great reluctance by officials. Because why do something new? You would have to put in work, change something, show some initiative, and you don't want to do that" (Case Study 4). Such complex formalities also affect the time it takes to process projects. Often, CSOs demand that solutions be implemented very quickly, but this is not possible within the existing legal framework (Case Study 1).

As the respondents note, Polish politics is characterized by "tribal wars." This term is used by both Kowalik and Jakubowski, as well as by Hubert Barański, president of the Normal City – Phenomenon Foundation from Łódź. Barański summarizes this thinking as follows: "If someone criticizes us, it means that he is our enemy. The local government sees no other option. Consequently, it does not want to cooperate with organizations that have some other proposals or different visions." Likewise, Jędrzej Włodarczyk from Better Gdańsk argues that "in Poland, there is no culture of cooperation between the various camps, the opposition and the authorities – groups with different views."

Local governments in Poland are divided between the ruling party and an opposition, and the quality of collaboration does not differ, no matter if the ruling party is the Civic Platform, Law and Justice or any other party. Kalina Michocka, a representative from the Kalisz Urban Initiative, notes that "political affiliations at the level of medium-sized cities are not important […] it doesn't really matter who belongs to which party." The quality of collaboration can be good with both of the major parties, regardless of whether activists agree with their national programs or not. Kowalska, who calls herself a leftist, says that on a local level, decisions are independent of political views. In fact, it is sometimes easier for her to get along with Law and Justice. For her, "this was bizarre because I am clearly against what Law and Justice does at the national level – I went to Warsaw for the protests.

According to the logic of these "tribal wars," NGOs that criticize the local authorities may be seen as political competitors. As Bogacz-Wojtanowska (2011) writes, smaller towns are particularly prone to this problem because the number of activists is limited, and local politicians are also recruited from NGOs. Local authorities fear that the NGOs will take power and thus put a stop to collaborations (Case Study 3). This tends to happen if an organization presents strong opinions and criticizes the local authorities. There are other NGOs, however, that use more gentle language and do not enter into disputes with the local authorities. As Barański explains, "there are also NGOs that are somehow 'polite', such as tourist and sports organizations. They do not argue with the authorities in any way, they do not criticize it, but take money because doing so is more convenient." Sometimes, this "gentle" way of collaboration is the only possible option. Mirosław Arczak, a local councilor in Olsztyn and a member of Common Olsztyn, says that some NGOs "have switched to such 'safe' activities, which are not aimed at confrontation with the authorities. Because there will always be a subsidy, and the authorities will not be difficult."

The possibilities of change

Based on the comments of our respondents, implementing effective collaboration requires a change in attitude on the part of officials and the local authorities. They should be open to dialog, accessible and flexible. Magdalena Mike and Jakub Leszczyński underline the importance of accessibility (Case Study 1). According to Mike, collaboration in Dąbrowa Górnicza has been possible because officials are working outside standard business hours. Similarly, Krzysztof Ślebioda from the Sustainable Development Workshop and Paweł Wyszomirski from the Fix Your City Foundation (Case Study 2) underline that the best partner is an open partner.

Changing the political culture requires bringing new people into local government, but experience on the part of officials is also important. In the Department of NGOs and Civic Activity of Dąbrowa Górnicza, the officials have experience working in the non-governmental sector (Case Study 1). Likewise, Piotr Choroś, Director of the Department of Social Participation in Lublin, notes that "the quality of cooperation may be much higher in local governments where the leadership, for example the chairpersons of councils, mayors or deputy mayors, have experience in the non-governmental sector. In local governments where those in power have no experience of working in the third sector and are unfamiliar with the details of this work, there are more barriers to cooperation."

On the other hand, NGOs should also be open to dialog and be prepared to compromise and collaborate with local government, as Bejnar-Bejnarowicz emphasizes (Case Study 3). Włodarczyk admits that "one has to realize that an NGO does not lose anything in this type of cooperation – it is just a pragmatic move, a tool to implement a part of the program. If the authorities are willing to enter into some kind of conversation, and are ready to support the demands, they must be allowed to do so." In other words, collaboration allows CSOs to achieve greater successes and to implement their ideas. Kowalska agrees that "it is necessary to consider whether it is actually always good to be in opposition. Perhaps it is better to cooperate in some way, for example by designating a few common points that can be implemented."

What will the future bring?

However, it is also important to look beyond the local level and to consider the national context. As Tomasz Schimanek notes, the political context has played a bigger and bigger role since 2016. "Until that time, in the local context, party membership was of little importance. People voted for a candidate regardless of what party he or she belonged to. The same candidates ran for different parties and people voted for them anyway." According to Schimanek, now "that Law and Justice rules, you can see locally that money is transferred to NGOs working in areas related to tradition, family and so on, and that support for tolerance, the environment and the defense of minority rights is limited." CSOs should thus be ready to cooperate not only with the local government, but also with other (local) NGOs. One of the umbrella associations that support the development of civil society is the Urban Movement Congress, which gathers NGOs dealing with urban policy from all over Poland. In addition, the Citizens Network Watchdog Poland also provides legal advice and training for NGOs. However, there are also other challenges on the horizon. The policy of the ruling party affects not only non-governmental organizations but also local governments. The words of Andrzej Bukowski sum up the current situation in Poland: "At the moment, we are talking about cooperation between local governments and non-governmental organizations, and at the same time the process of limiting the power of local government in Poland is taking place […]. We can talk about cooperation between local governments and non-governmental organizations, but if there is no local government, there will be no cooperation."

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List of respondents

Case study 1: Working for local government
Magdalena Mike | Responsible for collaboration with NGOs in the Dąbrowa Górnicza mayor's office
Piotr Drygała | Responsible for civil society matters in the Dąbrowa Górnicza mayor's office
Jakub Leszczyński | Head of the Dąbrowska Initiative

Case study 2: Providing expert knowledge from outside local government
Krzysztof Ślebioda | Head of the Sustainable Development Workshop, Toruń
Sylwia Kowalska | Head of the Time for Residents association, Toruń
Paweł Wyszomirski | Head of the Fix Your City Foundation, Katowice
Agnieszka Lis | Responsible for collaboration with NGOs in the Katowice mayor's office [written response]

Case study 3: Influencing local government as a watchdog
Kamil Nowak | Head of To Know More, Kędzierzyn Koźle
Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs | Heads of Civic City, Lubartów
Krzysztof Kowalik and Krzysztof Jakubowski | Heads of the Freedom Foundation, Lublin
Piotr Choroś | Director of the Social Participation Office, Lublin municipality
Kalina Michocka | Kalisz City Initiative

Case study 4: NGO as opposition in the city council
Alina Czyżewska | Citizens Network Watchdog Poland, People for the City Gorzów
Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz | Head of People for the City, local councilor in Gorzów, Urban Movements Congress
Anna Bonus Mackiewicz | Director of the Department of Social Consultations and Revitalization, Gorzów Wielkopolski municipality

Activists active on the local level
Hubert Barański | Head of Normal City – Phenomenon, Łódź
Mirosław Arczak | Head of Common Olsztyn, local councilor in Olsztyn
Jędrzej Włodarczyk | Head of Better Gdańsk
Paweł Harlender | OSOM Gliwice

Experts
Tomasz Schimanek | Expert from the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland
Andrzej Bukowski | Professor of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Case study 1

Working for local government – promoting change from within

Dąbrowska Initiative & Dąbrowa Górnicza

Interviewees

Magdalena Mike | Responsible for collaboration with NGOs in the Dąbrowa Górnicza mayor's office
Piotr Drygała | Responsible for civil society matters in the Dąbrowa Górnicza mayor's office
Jakub Leszczyński | Head of the Dąbrowska Initiative

"NGOs should be given the opportunity to act; it is important to trust them, to bet on them."
Jakub Leszczyński, President of the Dąbrowska Initiative

"There is not a single person in the Department of NGOs who was not previously involved in the work of an NGO or volunteering."
Magdalena Mike, responsible for collaboration with NGOs in the mayor's office

The city of Dąbrowa Górnicza

Dąbrowa Górnicza is located in the eastern part of the Silesian Voivodeship. As part of the Katowice conurbation, it forms part of the Upper Silesian Zagłębie Metropolis and has a population of over 120,000. Dąbrowa Górnicza is home to heavy and traditional industry, including the biggest steel producing plant in Poland, as well as metallurgy, mining, and coal installations.According to Magdalena Mike, who is in charge of collaboration with non-government organizations in the mayor's office, there are 323 civil society organizations (CSOs) in Dąbrowa Górnicza, one-fifth of which deal with sports and physical culture. In general, the city is host to a diverse range of NGOs, such as volunteer fire brigades, farmers' wives' associations, as well as charity and aid organizations.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Dąbrowska Initiative and its history

The history of the Dąbrowska Initiative (pol. *Inicjatywa Dąbrowska*) began in 2001. That year, the Green Zagłębie (pol. *Zielone Zagłębie*) association was founded by a group of 20-year old enthusiasts from Dąbrowa Górnicza. Some of them knew each other from high school, some from participation in the European Club of Zagłębie. Since the very beginning, the association has focused on integration and development of the local community. The early 2000s were also the time of Poland's accession to the European Union, and European integration was one of the association's priorities. At the time, its activists organized debates and summer camps for young people, for which they obtained funds from the EU.

Soon after, Green Zagłębie became an active organization aimed at strengthening Polish civil society, and it thus joined the National Federation of Polish NGOs. Piotr Drygała, founder of Green Zagłębie, remembers this time as difficult "in terms of cooperation between local government and NGOs," which he says was the general trend in Poland at the time. From 2001 to 2006, the association was involved in such projects as the "Academy of Democracy," a series of debates for teenagers that included a get-out-the-vote campaign to promote participation in local government elections and a web portal for the CSO sector that encouraged people to join NGOs.

The year 2006 marked an important turn in the association's history, after Zbigniew Podraza from the Democratic Left Alliance won the elections for mayor of Dąbrowa Górnicza. He replaced a mayor who had not been open to collaboration with CSOs, and members of Green Zagłębie sympathized with the Democratic Left Alliance and also knew Zbigniew Podraza personally. After taking office, the new mayor began to look for people to create a new team to manage the city. The local elections coincided with the graduation from university of the founding members of Green Zagłębie who were then looking for their first full-time jobs. Thus, Piotr Drygała and Marcin Bazylak decided to apply for positions in the municipality, to get into office and change the city from the inside.

For Piotr Drygała, it was clear that he would run for a job in the Department of Non-Governmental Organizations. As part of the research that he had carried out for his master thesis, he had analyzed the CSO sector in Dąbrowa Górnicza, investigating how the local government collaborates with non-governmental organizations. His thesis was fundamental for Green Zagłębie's projects, for which it also received funding from the government's "Citizens' Initiative Fund." This led to the establishment of the Dąbrowa Forum of NGOs (DFOP), which today brings together about 100 NGOs. "The forum prepared a proposal for regulations and a package of actions that was presented to the new mayor who accepted our proposal," says Piotr Drygała. DFOP also prepared the "Program for the Development of Civil Society in Dąbrowa Górnicza in the years 2008-2013," which was adopted by the city council. This was the basis on which the public-social partnership "Together for the City" was created. "It was thanks to the partnership that the Department of Non-Governmental Organizations was created in the municipality of Dąbrowa Górnicza in 2008," recalls Drygała. He was hired as the director of the department, and soon after started to implement the program.

Another institution created through the partnership was the NGO Incubator of Social Entrepreneurship. The foundations were laid by Green Zagłębie, which ran a CSO incubator between 2009 and 2011. After the adoption of the second program for the 2013-2020 period, the incubator was transformed into the Civic Activity Center, a place where NGOs can receive advice in the field of civil society activities. It is a separate entity, based in another building than the rest of the municipal offices, which has gained national recognition: in 2015, Dąbrowa Górnicza received an award from the Polish president for the activities organized by the partnership. Another milestone for the association was the year 2018. In 2016, Green Zagłębie was transformed into the Dąbrowska Initiative. Two years later, the city's then mayor, Zbigniew Podraza, announced that he would not be running again. For his successor, he proposed Marcin Bazylak, a member of the Dąbrowska Initiative and Deputy Mayor of Dąbrowa Górnicza from 2016 to 2018. Bazylak won the elections and then appointed Piotr Drygała, another founding member of Green Zagłębie, to be the official in charge of relations with civil society.

Today, the Dąbrowska Initiative has nearly 80 members, "the majority of whom are people with extensive experience, who have been working for the city for many years, who have developed many projects and who have been involved in creating the framework for social participation in the city," says Jakub Leszczyński, President of the Dąbrowska Initiative. Among them there are municipal officials, but also businessmen, lawyers, academics, and journalists. "The main goal of the Dąbrowska Initiative has not changed: to continue to make our city a better place to live," notes Leszczyński. "What has changed is our mode of organization: we work more as a think tank, we take part in meetings to discuss problems, and sometimes we offer solutions." Due to this conflict of interest, the Dąbrowska Initiative does not apply for funding from the municipality or interfere in its work. Nevertheless, according to Leszczyński, it remains a complex and open association that works specifically with civil society in the field of urban development.

The "Factory Full of Life" project

"To fully understand the collaboration between NGOs and the local government in Dąbrowa Górnicza, it is crucial to know the history of the city," states Piotr Drygała. Dąbrowa Górnicza developed together with the industries it hosts – the city grew its industry grew. In other words, industry determined the urbanization of the city, including the very center, where, among other businesses, a mine, a steel mill and the Defum machine tool factory were located. Due to this process, Dąbrowa Górnicza lacks a distinctive city center with characteristic functions.

From the very beginning, the members of the Dąbrowska Initiative were concerned with how to change the city and make it more livable. During one of their meetings, they came up with the idea to revitalize the old Defum machine tool factory and to transform it into the new center of Dąbrowa Górnicza. "The members of the Dąbrowska Initiative began to present their proposals to the municipality and started to talk about it. This was partly done through people working for the municipality who supported this idea," says Leszczyński. The city authorities accepted the project, and soon afterwards started to prepare business and financial plans for the revitalization. The result of the work was an "urban design project that aims to completely change the city center in a very modern, even modernist style, modeled on many Western cities," notes Leszczyński. Importantly, the municipality consulted with the Dąbrowska Initiative and city residents about the project during all stages of its creation. Members of the Dąbrowska Initiative attended the meetings and, as Leszczyński says, "proposed the original idea for the Factory Full of Life (pol. *Fabryka Pełna Życia*) and conveyed what it was about."

In the following stages of the work, other NGOs were also involved. Piotr Drygała sees the Factory Full of Life project as "an example of effective cooperation between the public sector and non-governmental organizations." The consultation process was conducted together with local organizations, some of which were responsible for organizing workshops, debates, and meetings about the future of the city center. Magdalena Mike cites the example of the Civitas Association, which was responsible for meetings with young people and seniors. "We are very proud of all these collaborations," says Drygała.

Right now, the revitalization is in the process of being implemented. The city council has established a company that is currently planning the first investments. "Tenders have been announced for catering services, for the opening of a local brewery. Buildings are being demolished. [...] This is why the collaboration right now is somewhat more limited," explains Leszczyński. It is worth noting, however, that a member of the Dąbrowska Initiative has been chosen to be the chairman of the board of the revitalization company. "He was the originator of the project. He has been living it for many years, he is 100% involved in it," says Leszczyński. "The municipality chose him due to his business skills, but also for his previous involvement in the project," he notes.

Conclusions

Positive and negative aspects of collaboration

The local government views the collaboration positively. For Magdalena Mike, the most important benefit of such collaboration is the possibility of reaching people who would not normally come into contact with the municipality and who do not like the municipal government as an institution. According to her, NGOs can "reach people whom the official can't reach." Another positive aspect is the organizational flexibility and the capacity for innovation of non-governmental organizations. "NGOs simply offer the support adequate to needs of people whose needs are being supported. They are innovative and flexible in their approach to problem solving, and they are often very willing to present innovative proposals to the local government." By contrast, the local government is less flexible because its activities depend on administrative and legal procedures. As Leszczyński explains, "the implementation of each project takes the municipality a lot of time: it has to prepare the tender documentation and formalize it – these are requirements imposed by law. People often do not understand this and react negatively." The time that needs to be invested can be reason for both the non-governmental organizations and the local government to withdraw from a collaboration. "Many officials feel that collaborations and carrying out public consultations significantly prolong the decision-making process and delay the implementation of actions," argues Mike.

How to make it work

"People. People are the worst and the best thing that happens during collaboration," says Magdalena Mike. Both representatives of NGOs and of the local government agree that the most important thing during a collaboration is to trust each other and to maintain an attitude of openness. On the one hand, officials need to be open and "ready to introduce changes, not only on paper, but also in reality," as Mike says. "NGOs should be given the opportunity to act; it is important to trust them, to bet on them," notes Leszczyński. Piotr Drygała recalls his own experience of starting to work as an official when the former mayor gave him "a free hand. We could realize our vision of creating a real dialog between the city and the organizations without interference. We were able to introduce solutions of our choice – the mayor never interfered in our actions." On the other hand, NGOs also need to be open to collaboration. "There must be some leaders and people from NGOs who are willing to get involved," Mike says.

During the collaboration, close and personal contact between the two partners is important. "It is important to create a team that will be available to the NGOs at all times," Leszczyński argues. According to him, this works well in Dąbrowa Górnicza, thanks to the existence of the Civic Activity Center. All the NGOs have to do is to "leave their offices, walk a few meters and knock on the door. The most important factors are direct, close contact, frequent meetings and face-to-face conversations," Leszczyński continues. Magdalena Mike confirms these observations: "For many years, as the officials responsible for collaboration with NGOs, we worked from 8 am to 8 pm, 12 hours a day, of course on a shift basis. Employees are ready to come in on weekends and talk with the organizations. As an employer, we expect flexibility." In Dąbrowa Górnicza, according to her, this has worked very well. This is also connected to the specific mode of recruitment: "There is not a single person in the department who was not previously involved in the work of an NGO or volunteering." From this perspective, the best way for NGO members to effect change is to apply for jobs with the municipality and to successfully implement their ideas from the inside.

Case study 2

Providing expert knowledge from outside local government

Sustainable Development Workshop, Toruń & Fix Your City, Katowice

Interviewees

Krzysztof Ślebioda | Head of the Sustainable Development Workshop, Toruń
Sylwia Kowalska | Head of the Time for Residents association, Toruń
**Paweł Wyszomirski |** Head of the Fix Your City Foundation, Katowice
Agnieszka Lis | Responsible for collaboration with NGOs in the Katowice mayor's office [written response]

"Collaboration with the city of Katowice didn't work; it was a simple conclusion: ok, they don't want us here, and we think we're doing cool things, we'll go do them somewhere else."

Paweł Wyszomirski, Fix Your City Foundation

"We started to work outside Toruń, in municipalities where we weren't treated as competitors, but as partners, and what mattered was our experience and competencies."

Krzysztof Ślebioda, Sustainable Development Workshop

Toruń & Katowice

Figure 1.
Location of Toruń and Katowice
Source: Wikimedia Commons
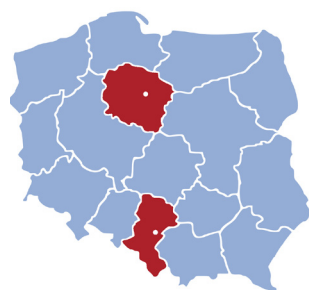
Toruń and Katowice are economically well developed medium-sized cities. Toruń is located in north-central Poland is one of capitals of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, together with Bydgoszcz. Its population is less than 200,000. Katowice, meanwhile, is the capital of the Silesian Region in southern Poland. With a population of 290,000, it is one of the centers of the Upper Silesian Zagłębie Metropolis The mayor of Toruń, Michał Zaleski, has been in office since 2002. The mayor's party forms an "exotic coalition" in the city council, as Krzysztof Ślebioda calls it, together with the Civic Platform, the Law and Justice Party and the Polish People's Party. By contrast, the mayor of Katowice since 2014, Marcin Krupa, has the support of Law and Justice.

How it started

Katowice and Toruń are home to two non-governmental organizations that collaborate with various municipalities in Poland, but – due to communication problems – do not work with the municipalities in which they are located. The first of the two to be established was the Sustainable Development Workshop (SDW, pol. *Pracownia Zrównoważonego Rozwoju*), which was founded in 2007 by three friends from Toruń who wanted to stay and live in the city after graduating from university. Among them there was Krzysztof Ślebioda, currently the President of the foundation. "From the beginning, the idea was to promote sustainable development with an inclination towards environmental protection," he recalls. Several years later, in 2010, the informal initiative "Fix Your City" (FYC, pol. *Napraw Sobie Miasto*) was established in Katowice. "It all started with an event that involved cleaning the train station," notes Paweł Wyszomirski, the President of the foundation's Board. "This action gave us the impetus to get to work." The foundation was formally registered two years later.

Both initiatives are aimed at improving the quality of urban public spaces and enhancing social participation. "Soon after, we started to collaborate with the local government. We knew that if we want to change something, we have to cooperate," explains Ślebioda. At that time, the activists organized debates, discussions, and educational campaigns. They worked in a three-person team, which later grew to 10 people. "At the beginning, the local government approved of our ideas, and the cooperation went very well," Ślebioda recalls. "The municipality was open to collaboration and ready to work together." Similarly, Wyszomirski argues that "the role of the Fix Your City foundation was to act as a mediator between what the local government says and what people want."

Fix the City!

In Toruń, one of the first projects of the Sustainable Development Workshop implemented in collaboration with the local government was "Let's fix it!" in 2012. SDW was one of the non-governmental organizations that worked on the implementation of "Fix Your Street" services in Poland. They wanted to launch a website in Toruń where citizens could report problems to the local authorities. The project was coordinated by the Warsaw-based Stocznia Foundation and financed by the Batory Foundation. SDW was responsible for contacts with the local government in Toruń, preparing the tool, and running the project for at least one year. At that time, the city of Toruń created a Department of Communication, which was open to collaboration with SDW. "This project was a challenge, but also a cool technological job for us and for the local government. The beginning was very, very promising" recalls Ślebioda. The team that was set up included representatives of SDW and city officials. "We met regularly, we launched a website with the approval and commitment of the local authorities. All this went very well and was met with an incredibly positive reception from city inhabitants."

One year later, SDW activists were suddenly informed that the project would not be continued, after the director of the Department of Communication had changed. The new director decided to withdraw the city's support for the tool. "We were informed that the city believes this service is a way for NGOs to highlight our errors to the local authorities," notes Ślebioda. "The city did not extend the contract, claiming that it was working on an application that would be better than ours." In so doing, the municipality excluded non-governmental organizations from the process. "Our work was wasted. From the point of view of collaboration, this project is a complete failure. We are still disappointed about it." Finally, the city of Toruń created a new service about five to six years after the SDW project.

The Fix Your City Foundation has a similar story to tell. In 2015-2016, it implemented a project called "Miejska Szychta," which was based on government funding and required collaboration with the municipality, with the aim of including citizens in urban governance. For three months, interdisciplinary groups of fifteen people worked on the project, carrying out social monitoring, making changes and testing solutions before the final implementation. Several initiatives were launched as part of this project, including:

- **"Gop Gear"** – a race in which groups of competitors try to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, using cars, bicycles or various combinations of public transport and checking the quality of transport and communication on a given route. The biggest race took place in 2018, organized in partnership with the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie metropolis with the aim of showing the quality of public transport in the Silesian conurbation.

- **Open data in Katowice** – a hackathon scheduled for 2016, based on data from the budget of the city of Katowice (2010-2016) and the Multiannual Financial Forecast, with a view to launching new services for citizens. The hackathon was never finalized, as the municipality of Katowice did not share the necessary data, but a series of meetings did take place.

- **#Cleanair** – a social campaign for reducing air pollution in Katowice that included the collection of signatures for a citizens' initiative to improve air quality during the 2016-2020 period.

The #cleanair campaign was a milestone in the collaboration between FYC and local government that involved different activists and politicians, representing both Law and Justice and the Civic Platform. However, the Civic Platform councilors were the first to publish photos from the campaign, "and the mayor was offended to death. They said they didn't want to cooperate anymore because it is a political project," says Wyszomirski.

"They do not want us here"

Figure 2.
Logo of the Sustainable Development Workshop

Figure 3.
Logo of the Fix Your City Foundation

"Collaboration with Katowice didn't work, it was a simple conclusion: ok, they don't want us here, and we think we're doing cool things, we'll go do them somewhere else," Wyszomirski notes. After several unsuccessful joint projects, the Fix Your City Foundation decided to implement its ideas outside Katowice. "Our actions met with great enthusiasm in other cities," he says. The Sustainable Development Workshop took a similar decision. "Around five years ago we decided not to cooperate with the Toruń municipality anymore," explains Krzysztof Ślebioda. "Our projects and experience have gained national recognition – we were able to collaborate with other cities."

The reasons for this failure are clear for both Wyszomirski and Ślebioda: the municipalities looked at them through the prism of politics. The local authorities feared that the NGOs were building a political force and would want to take power in the city by taking part in elections. Even though several officials liked their ideas and wanted to collaborate, the mayors were skeptical. The Sustainable Development Workshop suspects that it has been blacklisted by the municipality and is barred from joining any institutional form of collaboration with it. "We can't join any formal body, even if we apply and try to get there. We just don't get accepted," says Ślebioda. The director of the Department of Social Communication and Information of Toruń refused to be interviewed to clarify this matter. It should be underlined that a similar feeling was also expressed by other NGOs interviewed for this study, which may stem from the specific political culture in Poland (see also the Country Chapter).

In Toruń, this fear was reinforced by the emergence of the urban movement "Time for Citizens." In 2014, one of the leaders of SDW created a political movement and ran in the elections. Four people from Time for Citizens joined the 25-member city council. "Soon after, our foundation became associated with the political opposition. This hindered collaboration and led to a number of decisions – for example, we decided not to use municipal funds any longer," Ślebioda explains. After the elections, the Sustainable Development Workshop continued to collaborate with Time for Citizens. "Our activities coincided with those of SDW. We were partners, perhaps unnamed, but partners," as Sylwia Kowalska, President of Time for Citizens, explains. "We felt that we support each other. For example, when we were in the city council, sometimes it was easier for us to get access to information, to act, to do something. SDW used this possibility. We were in symbiosis," she adds. This affected the foundation's relationship with the local government. "The municipality never understood that criticism is about instigating positive changes and remedying elements that are not working properly, and not about undermining them," says Ślebioda.

Moreover, several times, the activists offered expertise and ideas that were then rejected by the local authorities. After some time, however, the municipality started to implement the same solutions while presenting them as its own projects. According to Ślebioda, this is how the local government in Toruń collaborates with non-governmental organizations: "NGOs provide some ideas for action, then the cooperation ends, and the same ideas are implemented by the city." The situation is similar in Katowice. The Fix Your City activists approached the local authorities with the idea of organizing a joint conference on clean air, which was rejected. However, the same day when the proposed conference was scheduled to take place, the mayor organized a remarkably similar conference. "We did not like this type of cooperation, stealing ideas combined with a lack of real action," notes Wyszomirski.

Conclusions

Collaboration outside the city of origin

This led both organization to the decision to start working in other cities than Toruń and Katowice, where "we weren't treated as competitors, but as partners, and what mattered was our experience and competencies," as Ślebioda explains. He adds that "it also feels a bit like a failure because we were created locally, and we wanted to develop Toruń. This is the place where we live, where our children go to school." However, he argues, when the foundation is not treated as a political enemy, collaboration can go very well. SDW and FYC have been successful at implementing their projects in other municipalities, thanks to the expertise of their members and their experience in conducting consultations and participation processes. Both organizations have been able to provide expert knowledge outside their local municipalities due to their specific profiles and more general focus.

One examples of effective collaboration is "Space for Participation," a governmental project led by several non-governmental organizations, including the Sustainable Development Workshop and the Fix Your City Foundation. The main topic is social participation and conducting public consultations on planning documents. As part of the project, the Sustainable Development Workshop started a cooperation with 26 municipalities from all over Poland, providing them with expert advice. The authorities were "coming in with an idea and money – we were the external experts who provide advice," as Ślebioda says.

The Fix Your City Foundation gained national recognition due to its innovative project "Livable Street," which focuses on urban prototyping and experimental urbanism. It uses small-scale, temporary interventions to start discussions about public space. While the initiative mostly took place on the streets, the prototyping was preceded by detailed research. So far, the foundation has implemented it in several cities in Poland, causing it to grow and to open a branch in Warsaw (in 2017). Livable Street eventually became sustainable enough to form a separate organization. Currently, FYC has 10 members. Its collaboration with the city of Katowice is formal: "The foundation rents an office from the municipality at a preferential rate for NGOs," says Agnieszka Lis, who is in charge of NGO relations in the Katowice mayor's office. "Although I do not have direct experience in collaboration with the foundation on specific projects, I had the opportunity to meet some of its members. These are people who are strongly involved in the activities they undertake, with the power to attract other citizens. […] I am glad that, like thousands of others, they are involved in the life of their local communities," she says.

At present, the FYC activists have abandoned their urban activities and are thinking about changing their concept. In contrast, the Sustainable Development Workshop continues to work in a four-member team. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some disruption, they see space for future development. "Until now, we've worked with municipalities that claimed that online tools are useless – now their eyes have been opened: there is no other way, public discussions have to take place on Zoom, and it is possible," notes Ślebioda.

How to make it work?

"It all depends on people," says Krzysztof Ślebioda. According to him, it is important to begin the process with an analysis of the situation and agreement on who will be responsible for collaboration on the part of local government. The Fix Your City Foundation has already developed a special technique that it calls the "agent of change" strategy. It searches for such "agents" within the local government: a person who is progressive and open to collaboration. If they find such a person, they support him or her and enter into a collaboration. It is only later that the idea of collaboration is presented to the mayor. This model is more effective than coming in as a non-governmental organization from the outside because it avoids the need to confront the administration. "The ideal model was to have someone in the municipality who understands our philosophy, and to have a mayor who understands that we are no threat who then gives the green light. We do not want to be Santa Claus who comes in to change something from the outside," Wyszomirski explains. "The first step is to be open. To learn something, you just have to start doing it," adds Ślebioda. In his opinion, the first step towards change would be to open the municipality and the administrative structures to new, young people with an open mind. "Digging yourself in, building walls around you, it doesn't lead to anything."

Case study 3
Influencing local government as a watchdog – exerting change, putting on pressure

To Know More, Kędzierzyn-Koźle; Civic City, Lubartów; Freedom Foundation, Lublin & Kalisz Urban Initiative, Kalisz

Interviewees

Kamil Nowak | Head of To Know More, Kędzierzyn Koźle
Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs | Heads of Civic City, Lubartów
Krzysztof Kowalik and Krzysztof Jakubowski | Heads of the Freedom Foundation, Lublin
Piotr Choroś | Director of the Social Participation Office, Lublin municipality
Kalina Michocka | Kalisz City Initiative

"Our organization is always in opposition to power no matter what that power is, because it is a watchdog organization."

Krzysztof Kowalik, Krzysztof Jakubowski, Freedom Foundation

"Our success was that we introduced certain topics to the public agenda, to the general circulation. Now nobody can dare disclose public information in Kalisz. […] There are a lot of officials who are not at the decision-making level, but their thinking changes and the office changes from the inside."

Kalina Michocka, Kalisz Urban Initiative

"Our collaboration is less formal. Contact with councilors is constant, they contact the foundation and react to what the foundation does. This also happens via Facebook."

Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs, Civic City Lubartów

"We are very often invited by the officials to take part in consultations. They call us, email us. I suspect that officials do it because they are legally obliged to do so."

Kamil Nowak, To Know More Foundation

Where the watchdogs are based

	Kędzierzyn-Koźle	Lubartów	Lublin	Kalisz
Region	Opole Voivodeship, Upper Silesia	Lublin Voivodeship, Lesser Poland	Lublin Voivodeship, Lesser Poland	Greater Poland
Population	61,000	23,000	340,000	100,000
Mayor	Sabina Nowosielska (supported by PO)	Krzysztof Paśnik (PSL)	Krzysztof Żuk (PO)	Krystian Kinastowski (independent)

The four organizations we analyzed are located in various regions of Poland, which are characterized by a different history and economic situation. Among them are examples of organizations from a small town (Lubartów), a medium-sized city (Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Kalisz) and a big city (Lublin). While the economic situation in Kalisz and Kędzierzyn-Koźle is relatively good due to the strength of the local industries, the inhabitants of the Lublin Voivodeship are among the most at risk of poverty in Poland.

These organizations are unique in their respective cities and regions. As Kamil Nowak, leader of the To Know More Foundation, states, "there are no other watchdogs or monitoring organizations in the Opole region except for our foundation," as most non-governmental activity focuses on "sports, culture or social care." Kalina Michocka from the Kalisz Urban Initiative shares this opinion: "there are no activists besides the Kalisz Urban Initiative, which engages in open data and transparency in Kalisz.

How it started

The creation of watchdog organizations dates back to the 2010s. Most of them were established as a gesture of disagreement with municipal policy. Their main goal was to publicize controversial decisions of the local authorities, and they postulated transparency across all city functions and open data. "The reason why we created our organization? Dissatisfaction and rebellion against what was happening," note Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs, leaders of Civic City Lubartów (pol. *Miasto Obywatelskie*). "Ten years ago, we started to fight against the sale of one of the city squares. A referendum was organized, and the square has not been sold until today," according to the activists.
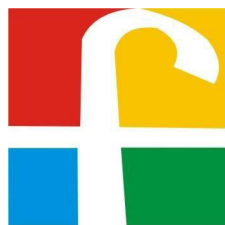
Figure 1.
Logo of the To Know More Foundation
Source: Facebook

Kamil Nowak identifies the roots of his interest in social activity in the difficulties that he faced in his previous job. At that time, he worked as a journalist for a local newspaper. "There were problems in getting answers to questions and issues. I was discouraged and in 2011 I decided to set up a foundation." As a result, one of the biggest projects of the To Know More Foundation (pol. Wiedzieć Więcej) has been analysis of the local press. "All newspapers in Kędzierzyn-Koźle are associated with the authorities," as Nowak explains. "An exceptionally large part of public finances goes to the media. Therefore, no one objects to the local authorities," he says. To expose this problem, the foundation publishes monitoring of the promotional expenses of the city of Kędzierzyn-Koźle.

Activists also disagreed with the authorities' lack of interest in the voice of citizens when making key decisions. The Freedom Foundation (pol. Fundacja Wolności) was established in 2012 to support civic participation through participatory budgets and public consultations. "With time – quite quickly – the foundation started to focus on civic control. This turn resulted from the needs of city inhabitants," explains Krzysztof Jakubowski, President of the foundation. Activists started to monitor the local authorities, apply for access to public information, and answer to complaints submitted by city inhabitants. "We founded the Kalisz Urban Initiative (pol. *Kaliska Inicjatywa Miejska*) in 2011 because we wanted to have an impact on the direction of city development," says Kalina Michocka. "We all worked as activists in Kalisz before, we just decided to formalize our work to be more effective." The main goal

Figure 2.
Logo of the Freedom Foundation
Source: Facebook

Figure 3.
Logo of the Kalisz Urban Initiative
Source: Facebook

of the association is to strengthen the dialog between local government and city inhabitants. "We never wanted to be an opposition to the local authorities, but a social partner that aims to talk to and cooperate with the local government," as Michocka explains.

Today, each organization works with a small team. The To Know More foundation is represented by three members. Meanwhile, Gryta and Wąs are the only members of the Civic City, but when it comes to concrete actions, volunteers are also involved. The Kalisz Urban Initiative brings together around 10 people and relies on the voluntary work of its members. The Freedom Foundation, in contrast, is supported by grants, which allows it to hire a four-person team. Activists from To Know More, Civic City, the Freedom Foundation and the Kalisz Urban Initiative are all members of the Citizens Network Watchdog Poland. This network provides them with workshops, training, and legal advice. The Kalisz Urban Initiative is also part of the Urban Movements Congress.

We want to know how public money is spent

Since they were founded, these organizations are trying to bring to light examples of nepotism in city management, defend the right to information and ensure protection against abuses of power. One of their main objectives was the creation of an online public contract registry for keeping track of all procurement activities conducted by the local government. In 2015, Civic City Lubartów sent a request to the mayor of Lubartów to create such a tool. "The foundation requested the creation of the register from the beginning of the mayor's term in office, and this was his second term, so he had to go back four years and complete this information," say Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs. "The mayor approved our application, which was quite a sensation for such a small town."

 "The biggest success of the Freedom Foundation in Lublin is that a public contract registry was created. […] The Freedom Foundation oversaw the process. It was the main driver on this subject in the talks with the municipality," remembers Piotr Choroś, Director of the Department of Social Participation in Lublin. In March 2014, the Freedom Foundation sent a request to the Lublin voivodeship marshal and to the mayor of Lublin to create a public contract registry. Soon after, the marshal answered and agreed to create such an online repository, while the mayor refused, citing the fact that there is no EU or national requirement for publishing the contracts.

Thanks to the activity of the foundation and media coverage, public opinion started to put pressure on the mayor. "Everybody started to ask: 'does the mayor have anything to hide? Is there anything in these contracts that the mayor does not want to be public?'" Due to this pressure, in the summer of 2014, the mayor announced that a public contract registry would be created in Lublin. "By that time there were some fields in which the Freedom Foundation proposed something that was later part of the discussion within the municipal government, and then some of these ideas came to fruition," notes Piotr Choroś.

To fulfill the principle of transparency, citizens should have universal access to information on the activities of public bodies. Not only should it be public, but the information should also be provided in a clear and understandable format. This is why the organizations that are involved in these projects aim to present the data in an accessible way. For example, the Freedom Foundation created a visualization of the city's budget, showing where the money is going, where it comes from and what it is spent on.

The Kalisz Urban Initiative also tried to talk about municipal finances in a language that would be understood by citizens. It completed two editions of a project called "Social Analysis of the Budget," the first in 2013-2014, and the second in 2014-2015. "The idea came from an organization in Amsterdam dealing with the transmission of knowledge from the Global South to the Global North. They taught us how to run this type of service. We even went to Amsterdam for special meetings," Kalina Michocka recalls. "We got a grant for this service and we wanted to implement it in Kalisz."

The activists initiated collaborations with officials and started to meet with them, to discuss the issues and to acquire knowledge about the budget. "This cooperation was close and the work intensive," says Michocka. During this process, they organized open meetings and invited experts; Watchdog Poland carried out a training for city officials on access to public information. Together with the officials, the activists drafted various documents, such as regulations for public consultations. "We gave them prepared solutions. Unfortunately, there was no real political will and most of the documents were never used. […] This project required a lot of work, I was really involved in it, but the local government underestimated it. Although officials wanted change and they participated, there was no will on the part of the mayor," Michocka says.

We want to control our representatives

Another topic raised by the organizations is civic access to public information about citizens' representatives. They want to encourage people to exercise their right to vote and increase their knowledge about local councilors and political parties. To do that, some of the organizations collaborated with Association 61. Association 61 is a nationwide organization that is developing a web service called "I have a right to know," which gathers and processes data on candidates in elections. The Kalisz Urban Initiative and Civic City were responsible for creating and implementing similar services in Kalisz and Lubartów. "We ran this service in the years 2014-2018," says Kalina Michocka. "In doing so, we wanted to publicize the problem that council sessions were not recorded, and that councilors were not known to the public." Michocka considers the project a success of her association: "At the end of the previous term, the city of Kalisz created its e-session website. It is incredibly detailed, there is a lot of information, so we gave up running our own website. It is not needed anymore," she concludes.

The Civic City foundation from Lubartów developed a similar website. "It all started in 2014 when we submitted a formal application for council voting records with names, so that people would know which councilor voted for which option," explain Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs. After negotiations with the local authorities, a compromise was reached. The local government decided to introduce audio and video recording of the city council sessions. "This enabled us to work on the service 'I have a right to know,'" conclude Gryta and Wąs.
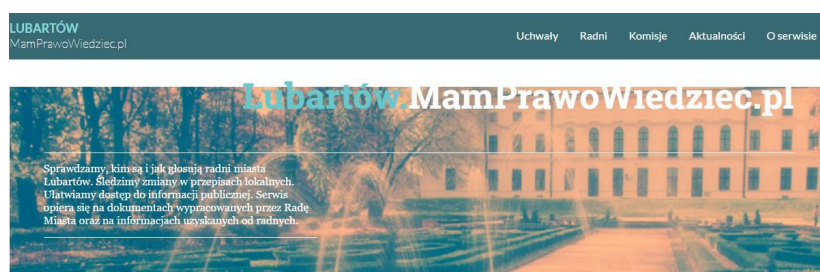

Figure 4.
Lubartów. The website "I have a right to know."
Source: http://lubartow.mamprawowiedziec.pl/

"We look at the activities of local councilors and it has a big effect," say Krzysztof Jakubowski and Krzysztof Kowalik from the Freedom Foundation. "It motivates them. We don't know if the quality of their actions is any better, but they certainly have become more active: they put their pictures on the internet, contact each other, they submit more questions and proposals, and care more about being present at sessions and voting," according to the activists. In the future, the foundation is planning to run a website that will enable citizens to vote on matters before the city council. The Freedom Foundation has already received a grant for this project. "This project aims to increase citizen's interest in what the local government does. On the other hand, maybe this application will be a form of exerting pressure on councilors. […] This would be a valuable indication for councilors on how to vote," conclude Kowalik and Jakubowski.
Is there collaboration with the authorities?

There is no collaboration

"Our organization is always in opposition to power, no matter what that power is, because it is a watchdog organization," argue Kowalik and Jakubowski from the Freedom Foundation. "On the one hand, the foundation acts as a watchdog, that is, it is concerned with everything related to transparency, openness, information, avoiding conflicts of interest or nepotism – the mission of the foundation is to monitor, publicize these matters, to lobby for change if there are any wrongdoings" The activists agree that as a watchdog, they cannot collaborate with the local government. The Director of the Department of Social Participation of Lublin, Piotr Choroś, expresses a similar opinion. "The Freedom Foundation is not an organization that cooperates with the municipality. They position themselves as an entity that does not cooperate with the municipality in a systemic sense, but as a watchdog organization that focuses on control," he notes. "The Freedom Foundation as an organization is strict in this belief and it's nice that such an entity works and does not mix these several roles." In this point of view, watchdogs, by definition, should not collaborate with local government. Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs state that when they started to talk with the local government, they "had doubts, because as a watchdog we should look at people's hands. We feared that it would turn into a farce if the watchdog organization got along well with the authorities." On the other hand, even if they want to collaborate, the local government may not be open to their proposals. "We are an organization that scrutinizes the authorities, we ask questions. Consequently, we are not liked […]. Other organizations prefer to keep quiet and simply take money from the local government," explains Kamil Nowak of To Know More. "In the functioning of NGOs, reconciling the role of a substantive partner that works together with the municipality with that of a watchdog organization that examines the municipality's activities, with whistleblowing if it notices that something is wrong as its main activity, it is very difficult, and maybe even impossible," concludes Piotr Choroś.

Or is there?

Even though the activists see formal collaboration as a contradiction of the watchdog role of their organizations, they try to influence the local authorities in other ways. Activists take part in public consultations and provide advice to local government. For example, the Freedom Foundation was invited by the Department of Social Participation of Lublin to hold a workshop on open data for officials. "This proves that the municipality is sometimes interested in collaboration," explains Krzysztof Jakubowski. "This could be seen as some form of cooperation, but we are not meeting, for example, to discuss 'what to change in the civic budget.' Nevertheless, representatives of the foundation come to consultative meetings and speak at them representing their point of view. Very often they come and record the meetings," notes Piotr Choroś.

According to Kamil Nowak, in Kędzierzyn-Koźle this kind of collaboration is the result of formal regulations. "We are very often invited by the officials to take part in consultations. They call us, email us. I suspect that the officials do it because they are legally obliged to do so," says Kamil Nowak of To Know More. "We always take part in consultations. Unfortunately, this is where our collaboration ends," he emphasizes. Anna Gryta and Elżbieta Wąs agree, noting that their "collaboration is less formal." "We are in constant contact with the councilors, they contact the foundation and react to what the foundation does. This also happens via Facebook," they explain. In fact, our interview was interrupted by a call from the chairman of the municipal council, who wanted to consult with the activists on a number of issues. "We want to recall the chairman in a referendum. But as you can see, despite that, it is possible to talk," comment Gryta and Wąs. It could be argued that the less formal character of the cooperation stems from the fact that Lubartów is a small town (20,000 inhabitants). Collaborative relations may thus be less formalized and depend instead on informal interpersonal relationships.

Even if the collaboration is less formal, watchdogs are able to effect change and put pressure on the local government. "Our success was that we introduced certain topics to the public agenda, bringing them into general circulation," as Kalina Michocka emphasizes. "Now nobody can dare to conceal public information in Kalisz. Thanks to our activity, the sessions of the city council are recorded and there are voting records that indicate how each councilor voted. There is a general awareness in Kalisz that the NGOs can work and that there are no other interests behind it, no business interests. […] There are many officials who are not at the decision-making level, but their thinking changes and the authorities change from the inside." By exerting pressure, watchdogs can implement their strategic plans. They use transparency and control as tools to strengthen civil society, to increase the knowledge of citizens and to develop their competencies as partners involved in decision-making about their city. Watchdogs thus strive for permanent qualitative changes in the activities of public authorities, in the interests of citizens.

Case study 4
NGOs as opposition in the city council – from pushing from the outside to gaining influence as politicians

People for the City, Gorzów Wielkopolski

Interviewees

Alina Czyżewska | Citizens Network Watchdog Poland, People for the City Gorzów
Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz | Head of People for the City, local councilor in Gorzów, Urban Movements Congress
Anna Bonus Mackiewicz | Director of the Department of Social Consultations and Revitalization, Gorzów Wielkopolski municipality

"I went through stages of war with the mayor, political pressure, arguing, reconciling, and so on. Ultimately, I think that the most effective and least annoying option is to collaborate and be ready to compromise."

Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz, President of People for the City

"In the most difficult moments the department had a lot of support from the People for the City movement. […] officials and activists stood side by side and defended the project, they tried to explain together why it is needed, how it will affect the city."

Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz, *Director of the Department of Social Communication and Revitalization of Gorzów Wielkopolski*

The city of Gorzów Wielkopolski

Figure 1.
Location of Gorzów Wielkopolski
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Gorzów Wielkopolski is located in western Poland and has population of over 120,000. It is one of two capitals of the Lubusz Voivodeship, together with Zielona Góra. In the postwar era, Gorzów was home to many industries: chemical fibers, textiles, and tractors. After the capitalist transition, the former state-owned companies went bankrupt or suffered severe financial problems. In the 2000s, the city faced the challenge of rebuilding the local economy. New private companies were established in a number of sectors, such as car wiring systems, heat and power plants, veterinary medicine, and the chemical industry.

According to Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz, President of the People for the City association and a local councilor, there are around 100 civil society entities in Gorzów Wielkopolski, most of which are charity or sports organizations. She estimates that there are around 10 organizations that deal with social participation and urban issues. "It is very little, but there is simply no need for more NGOs in a small city like Gorzów," she explains. In Gorzów, there is neither a Public Benefit Council nor a Non-Governmental Organizations Center. Currently, a team is being set up that will be responsible for developing a program of collaboration between local government and NGOs.

People for the City and its history

The People for the City (pol. *Ludzie dla Miasta*) movement was established in 2013 during a protest against the cutting of trees. A group of inhabitants who were concerned about the plans of the former mayor called for a change in building plans to preserve the trees in question. "We didn't know each other before, but we shared the same point of view on what the city should look like," as Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz recalls. The group included a road worker, a dendrologist, an urban planner, an architect, as well as a cultural animator. "This is how we met. We just started to talk and cooperate," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. Eventually, the mayor withdrew the building plans. In 2014, local elections were held in Poland. "We thought that if there are so many of us, we should run in the elections for the city council," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. After conducting a political analysis, the activists decided that they should put forward a candidate for

mayor in order to increase their chances of electoral success. They chose Jacek Wójcicki, who was already known in the city, as he was the mayor (pol. *wójt*) of the neighboring municipality. Due to his high profile and an intensive political campaign, Wójcicki won in the first round with over 60% of votes, beating the incumbent mayor – Tadeusz Jędrzejczak from the Democratic Left Alliance – who was seeking reelection.

People for the City' entered the 25-member city council with 7 representatives. At that time, the Civic Platform had 8 councilors, Law and Justice 5, the Democratic Left Alliance 3, the Polish People's Party 1 and 1 member was an independent candidate. "The first year was exceedingly difficult for us. We served as local councilors for the first time. We had no previous local government experience in this form," Bejnar-Bejnarowicz recalls. During the first year, the collaboration between the councilors, People for the City and the local government went well. For example, the association successfully lobbied for the creation of the Department of Spatial Planning and the office of City Architect. This position was filled by one of the members of the People for the City movement, while several other members were also hired to work in at the municipality at lower levels.

Between 2014 and 2018, four councilors left the People for the City association because of an internal conflict. Together with the mayor and two former councilors from the Democratic Left Alliance and the Civic Platform they formed a separate group in the city council. This weakened the movement and put it in the role of the opposition. In 2018, Jacek Wojcicki again ran in the elections, but this time separately from People for the City, and won with 65% of votes. In response, activists from other organizations created the "I love Gorzów" coalition committee, three of whom entered the city council, while Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz was the only one representative of People for the City to be elected.

Today, People for the city has around 20 members. "Nowadays our association functions as an NGO: we carry out different social projects," Bejnar-Bejnarowicz states. In 2019, the activists organized a crocheting workshop with a local craftsman, and this year they are running yoga classes for seniors. "There is a group within the association that does not engage in politics at all, and there is also a part that is politically involved," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. "People who wanted to focus only on politics, but weren't elected to the city council in 2018, left the association to pursue their political careers in a different manner. In the association there are those who want to get involved socially as NGO," adds Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. The association continues to be part of the Urban Movement Congress, in which it plays a significant role, with Bejnar-Bejnarowicz acting as President of the Congress.

Social communication and revitalization

"There is a department in the municipality of Gorzów that was created as a result of the People for the City election program, which is dedicated to social participation and the 'right to the city,' public consultations and revitalization," says Alina Czyżewska, a member of the movement. During the 2014 campaign, People for the City lobbied for the creation of a special unit that would approach revitalization in a systematic way. After the elections, the mayor created the Department of Public Consultations and Revitalization. "Certainly, the very initiative for establishing this department and combining these two threads – social consultations and revitalization – in one unit, was largely due to the activities of the urban movement before and during the election campaign," stresses Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz, the department's Director.

The director and the employees of the department were selected through an independent recruitment process. "The office brought together officials who really believed in change, who thought that nothing should be decided over the heads of the citizens anymore, that they should be listened to," explains Alina Czyżewska. Officials were incredibly open to collaboration with non-governmental organizations, as well as with citizens. "They were going out of their offices, they had stands on the streets, they had tents. They used to stand outside and talk no matter if it was raining or snowing – they tried to reach consensus positions," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. "There is no other department in Poland that would approach revitalization, participation and social consultations as well as social dialog in such a comprehensive and positive way," she notes.

From the very beginning, People for the City collaborated with the new department. Members of the movement take part in consultations and help to create participatory tools that will answer the needs of all city inhabitants. "I meet regularly with the director of the department and we discuss all the activities step by step. I submit comments, try to attend evaluation meetings and work on changes to the participatory budget regulations," explains Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. On the other hand, the department is also willing to support activists if they want to organize public consultations, meetings, or debates with citizens – it handles the promotion of these activities and the preparation of the materials. "We have a collaboration and I can't complain about it at all," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz.

Figure 2.
The Wool Market in Gorzów
Author: Halina Frederiksen
Source: Wikimedia

One of the biggest projects that involved collaboration between the department and activists was the urban prototyping for the "Livable Street" initiative, which involved the reconstruction of a street in the city center. "Seven or eight years ago, the municipality would sign a contract with a company and would do the construction work as the designer had proposed. As a result of the establishment of the department, as well as the daily cooperation with the People for the City movement and its know-how, this process is now completely different," explains Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz. It now involves urban prototyping aimed at preparing construction plans that will address the needs of all city inhabitants.

"A very big conflict arose due the fact that the plan foresaw the elimination of parking spaces, the removal of car traffic and the creation of a pedestrian promenade," explains Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz. "There were exceptionally large protests from the so-called urban backward movements, car drivers. We were taking away their 'holy' parking spaces and attacked the 'sacred' road capacity. We did not want to let cars into the center. These protests were so strong that we received threats," says Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. "In the most difficult moments, the department had a lot of support from the People for the City movement. Despite the fact that it was a difficult project that was met with huge criticism […] officials and activists stood side by side and defended the project, trying to explain together why it was needed and how it would affect the city," recalls Bonus-Mackiewicz.

Urban prototyping helped to demonstrate that despite these protests, the city inhabitants liked the new space in practice. "Again, the urban prototyping was done after People for the City proposed it, based on its know-how. The foundation told us about this concept […] explaining that there is a method that allows us to see how the flow of people, cars, pedestrians and bicycles would behave in different urban contexts," says Bonus-Mackiewicz.

How to make collaboration work

According to Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz, the quality of collaboration between local government and NGOs depends on the political will of the mayor. "If the mayor wants to, even if he fails once, because people screw up, he will replace these people or train them and try again. The third time it will go as it should. But he needs to be convinced that the idea is good and give people the opportunity to learn from mistakes. […] If the mayor wants to do it, he will persevere until he succeeds," she says. "Collaboration of local government with NGOs is certainly influenced by the acceptance and openness of the mayor to a certain way of thinking about the city and its development. If this is not the case, then even the most dynamic organization with the most enlightened ideas and the greatest experience will not break through, it will not stand a chance," states Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz. In the opinion of Marta Bejnar-Bejnarowicz, even if civil servants are open to a collaboration and understand that it is needed, they do not have enough impact to transform it into action.

If an NGO wants to collaborate, it should be prepared to compromise. "I went through stages of war with the mayor, political pressure, arguing, reconciling, and so on. Ultimately, I think that the most effective and least annoying option is to collaborate and be ready to compromise and give up some of your demands," advises Bejnar-Bejnarowicz. According to her, it is rarely possible that 100% of an NGO's demands will be implemented as part of a collaboration. However, even if 10% are implemented, then this one tenth can prompt real, irreversible change. This is why every movement or non-governmental organization should try to collaborate. "Activists have to understand that the mayor cannot say that he will only listen to one non-governmental organization. No – the city has limited space, for which different groups of users compete. The inhabitants have different needs and interests and the municipality must be open to everyone," as Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz explains.

On the other hand, even if the mayor is open to collaboration, its implementation may prove difficult. One of the negative aspects, according to Anna Bonus-Mackiewicz, is a lack of NGO competencies when it comes to legal and organizational restrictions. "Some ideas of some organizations are detached from the legal, organizational and technical reality, and not every organization is competent enough to do it," she says. Activists do not consider the fact that "the city and the local government operate under the law and within the law. This can give rise to a number of restrictions that may not be visible to someone from the outside," as Bonus-Mackiewicz states. Local government is very often criticized for being slow, but this dynamic is frequently the result of legal regulations and procedures. "Activists very often do not understand this," argues Bonus-Mackiewicz. The solution might be to collaborate on technical rather than on abstract projects. "The demands of NGOs are valuable, but they are often too operational. There is a lack of understanding that strategic documents are more abstract, and that they do not prescribe specific, concrete solutions." However, she concludes that "these minor downsides do not change the fact that collaboration is generally an added value."

Romania

CLUJ-NAPOCA

IAȘI

ALBA IULIA

ODORHEIU

SIBIU

FĂGĂRAȘ

VÂLCEA

SINAIA

BUCHAREST

MEDGIDIA

Sites where interviews
were conducted

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 (*Şcoala de la Păltiniş*, for example), strikes, protests and similar actions *(Valea Jiului in 1977, Motru in 1981, Braşov 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, Odorheiul 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
Ilinca Macarie | Bucharest 1st District Council
Liviu Mălureanu | Bucharest 3rd District Council
Daniela Popa | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1st 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 1st 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 Moșescu | 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 if 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 Moșescu'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

Come 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 (Odorheiul 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,[25] 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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25   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 plan 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 I Bucharest I Bucharest, 1st District and 3rd District I Iaşi I Făgăraş

Interviewees:

Alexandrina Dringa | CIVICA Iaşi
Dan Postolea | Iaşi municipal government
Cristiana Metea | Fundaţia Comunitară Ţara Făgăraşului
Liviu Ardelean | Făgăraş municipal government
Ana Ciceală | General Council of Bucharest
Ilinca Macarie | Bucharest 1st District Council
Liviu Mălureanu | Bucharest 3rd District Council
Daniela Popa | Deputy Mayor of Bucharest's 1st District
Diana Culescu | Asociaţia Peisagiştilor 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 Făgăraş, 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 *Asociaţia Pro Democraţia*, 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 – Făgăraş has a EUR 15,000 limit, that of Bucharest's 1st 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 Iaşi, 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, Iaşi, Făgăraş 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 Iaşi, an original take on the idea helped to promote citizens' involvement, and in Făgăraş, 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 Bucureşti* (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

3rd District councilor Liviu Mălureanu and his colleagues took inspiration from Timişoara 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 1st District of Bucharest carried out its *first round of PB* this year. The structure was similar to that of the 3rd 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 1st 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 Peisagiştilor 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.

Iaşi

Iaşi.Tu decizi (*Iaşi. 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 Iaşi 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, Iaşi 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 Iaşi. 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 *Cetăţenii Conduc* (The Citizens are in Charge), together with the Iaşi 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 is 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.

Făgăraş

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 Ţara Făgăraşului 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 Adrelean argues, since most people are politically involved in some way.

Cristana Metea, from the Ţara Făgăraşului 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 Iaşi, 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 1st District
Irina Zamfirescu | Active Watch
Diana Culescu | Asociaţia Peisagiştilor din România
Carmen Nemeş | Asociaţia ANAIS
Raluca Fişer | 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 Bucureşti, 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 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 5th 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[26]. 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, "Asociaţia 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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26 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 Zamforescu 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 Fişer 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.

Asociaţia ANAIS

Asociaţia 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.

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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 acţiuni, 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.

1st District Administration

The 1st 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.