

# An Ethnographic Account on Transparency and Participation in Civil-Public Cooperation: Enablers and Constraints in Iași, the First Romanian City Admitted to Open Government Partnership - Local Program

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to pioneer ethnographic research on enablers and constraints in transparency and participation building at the local level. The case study is focused on Iași’s experience as the first Romanian city admitted to Open Government Partnership - Local Program and highlights how the relative trust of local authorities in civil actors translated into maximal inclusion and freedom for drafting the city action plan on transparency and open governance. However, trust was also fueled by local authorities’ disengagement with OGP mechanisms, which translated into watercolor local democracy. Particular emphasis is placed on the dynamics of friendliness as a soft pressure mechanism securing collaboration between civil actors and public servants, to counterbalance the lack of political will in designing participatory structures. The authors come to the conclusion that toe-holds bridging civil society pioneers and friendly technical staff of the City Hall have cornerstone value for enabling democracy innovation at the local level when political will is weak. However, it is not enough to ensure continuity and there is a need for both civil society capacity building and political reframing to build sustainable transparency that converts into genuine public participation.

**Keywords:** *transparency; participation; open government partnership; Iasi; civil-public collaboration.*

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## 1. Introduction

The novelty of ethnographic research in political studies is currently emphasized as a study branch that harnesses interdisciplinarity needed to understand participatory dynamics as a confluence topic, bridging knowledge from fields related to law, communication, public administration, and social and political sciences. Anthropological in its essence, the ethnographic approach, in researching multi-faced phenomena related to the transformation of political and social structures, is saluted as the best fit for highlighting interrelated processes, while also recovering research authenticity, which is related to higher discovery rates in explanatory theory building (Miller, 2022). The present study aims to contribute to laying the foundation of ethnographic approaches in studying transformations in transparency and community participatory mechanisms in local politics. The authors of this article participated in Iași's admission to Open Government Local Program, which was the first Romanian city accepted into the alliance. As members of CIVICA (n.d.), a local NGO for transparency and better governance, they served as civil society's point of contact and contributed to drafting and coordinating participatory mechanisms employed in the co-creation of the city action plan for transparency and open governance. They also mediated the relationship between the Washington DC management team of the OGP Local Program and the local administration.

The main framework of OGP is oriented towards building transparency and accountability in public administration, with the specific purpose of harnessing public participation in state and city co-management (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021). A pioneer in shaping trends related to multi-level multi-actor governance (Haus, Heinelt, & Stewart, 2004), the local program of OGP became a melting pot of civil-public collaborations (Chatwin, & Francoli, 2022; Ingrams, 2018), accelerating, as such, democracy innovation and democracy deepening (Fung & Wright, 2003). There is a wide consensus that transparency alone is not strongly correlated with public engagement into decision-making, but without it, public participation is doomed to never happen. Transparency movements started in recognition that states, with their institutions, processes, and procedures, are functioning as black boxes for their residents. Most of the citizens don't know how state agencies actually work, and even less, how exactly they should work in order to make their life better. However, the state is supposed to offer people their main bank of symbolic capital, to help them reclaim their lives from the hazard and provide them a significant social construction within which they

could build meaningful lives. Transparency principles were, as such, firstly built on the idea that public knowledge is a basic requirement in order to empower people to shift their social role from passive subjects of states, into citizens (Coleman, 2001; Bourdieu, 2000).

One of the most common operational definitions of a free society conditions democracy of citizens' ability to actively participate in self-realization. To practice self-realization, however, a serial of conditions must be met. The most important one is to have a social structure that allows it. Institutions and the actors of power must be significant within people's personal consciences. Otherwise, they are unable to conscientiously choose among different courses of actions and behaviors. Society breaks down into apathy when its members do not understand and do not value its management structures. Conscientious choices may be made – meaning that someone chooses a course of action over another for a specific and clear reason – only when people can invest their choices with personal meaning. The educational system, institutional transparency and, opportunities to participate in public decision-making processes are core features for self-realization (Pippin, 1999)

A state's entire administrative culture should be open and transparent in order to actively encourage its citizens to participate in the democratic life of that state. Transparency was frequently violated in Romania, and public participation was viewed as a seasonal event (Shkabatur, 2012). Although the need for minimum transparency standards has been emphasized in legal provisions, its frequent use has not produced the desired results. Only a sustained effort on the part of all community actors can result in polarization at the level of the entire society, stimulating the desire for active participation and ultimately leading to a genuine increase in the level of transparency.

The fourth Romanian National OGP Action Plan 2018-2020 included an initiative for open local government, which the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration took up and implemented. This dedication had led to 8 informational seminars on local open government for 111 municipalities and more than 200 civil workers, as well as an annual competition to promote and honor top local open government practices (OGP Romania, 2018).

At the local government level, as a result of the efforts of civil society and institutions to disseminate OGP and open government principles, two cities in Romania are currently members of the Local OGP Program: the Municipality of Iasi and the Municipality of Timisoara.

## **2. Being an OGP Local member: shaping civil-public collaboration in Iași**

In 2016, CIVICA, an NGO for transparency and better governance in Iași, started its first local endeavors to improve accountability in public decision-making (Uși Deschise Către Administrația Ieșeană, n.d.). Iași is the main north-eastern city of Romania, once known for its active community built around the University. However, in 2016, the city's collective knowledge of community-shaped behaviors of the local administration was rather scarce, as most of the people had little knowledge about how public decisions are made or who is responsible for what. By that time, only two community-building experiences stood out in regards to public mobilization for reaching common goals: „The people of Iași want their airport” and „Iași loves linden trees”. Both initiatives ended up as civic victories and inspired the overall mission and activity of CIVICA.

„The people of Iași want their airport” was designed to put pressure on the local administration to prioritize the modernization of the local airport. This project seemed to forever slip away from politicians' agenda, even though it was regarded as a great opportunity to enhance local mobility and entrepreneurial activity. The civic team of the project ran public campaigns and conducted multiple meetings with various key actors. Coordinated and constant advocacy drove the administration to accelerate workings. For almost two years, from 2012 to 2013, the team monitored modernization activities at the local airport, until they were finally finished.

The second initiative, „Iași loves linden trees”, was prompted by the local administration's decision to cut all linden trees from the historical square of the city, with no previous public consultation. Those trees represented an identity symbol for the locals, as they survived two World Wars. After more than two years of campaigning, from 2013 to 2015, they were sowed back. The civic group aggregated the efforts of many professional groups, such as architects, historians, and other specialists, to prove the significance of those trees for the local community and to dismantle authorities' arguments for cutting them down. A strong campaign reached local to national audiences and ended up in building a civic force that contested both the grounds of the authorities' decision and the manner they took it, without public consultation. The group activated many key players in order to build public awareness about the issue and to develop solutions to counteract the wrongs done.

Based on this legacy, CIVICA started to build toward transparency, as a framework for enabling public participation. “Ne Reprezintă (They

Represent Us)”(n.d) was the first local project aimed to aggregate objective knowledge about local councilors’ public activities. Specific indicators for the quantitative and descriptive evaluation of their work were defined and a laborious assessment of public transparency in local administration was made, as a lot of public information was found to be missing from the official website of the City Hall. A collective endeavor on public data gathering and interpretation backed an extensive initiative to design a digital instrument aimed to make it easy for all citizens to monitor the activity of the elected members of the City Council.

While transparency demands were initially rooted in overt adversative relations between the local administration and the civil society, CIVICA gradually turned towards transparency as a foundation for civil-public collaboration. After a series of rather rough collective meetings with local public servants, to improve the information architecture of the official website of the City Hall, CIVICA members started to work one-to-one or in small group sessions with various technical employees, to understand the limits in public information provision and to envision solutions. The collaborative approach proved more successful than the conflictual one, as the City Hall did subsequently implement multiple suggestions.

Designing “Cetățenii Conduc (Citizens in Charge without Taking Power)” (n.d.) in 2017, the first project on generative politics, as Giddens (1994) defines them, basically laid the foundation for civil-public collaboration at the local level. Its major aim was to reclaim the symbolic pragmatics of reason for local citizens (Žižek, 2012), and enable them to act on their reasoning, in order to harness the large intellectual collective endowment of the city which is mainly built around its universities. That meant merging citizens’ and local representatives’ agendas and creating contexts and spaces for them to work together towards shared objectives. By 2018, when OGP launched the second call for local governments, CIVICA built a framework of relative trust and cooperation between citizens and the local administration. That allowed it to pitch the City Hall to apply. At the time, OGP was new to the local administration staff. However, based on trust, but also assuming there were small chances for Iași to win the competition, some employees persuaded the mayor to agree to apply. CIVICA members consistently helped in drafting the portfolio, as OGP adherence seemed a great opportunity to move public participation forward.

In April 2018, the City Hall was taken by surprise when the OGP team announced the list of the selected cities and Iași was one of them. For a brief moment, the mayoral team received the announcement as a prize or a validation, but then realized it was practically a commitment to actually

support new, bold policies on transparency and participation. It was then that communication channels first collided. As a new member, the city administration was expected to start planning due activities to ensure the co-creation of the action plan on transparency and citizens' engagement in urban co-management. However, after brief, introductory discussions with OGP representatives, the local administration bypassed all meetings with OGP staff and indefinitely postponed all associated activities. The administration's behavior took by surprise the OGP team, who turned to CIVICA in trying to understand the local context and strategize the future course of action.

After several consultations with CIVICA and considering the exclusion of the city from OGP, the coordinative team decided to smooth the way for local representatives and help them get more accustomed to the culture of participation of other mayors, in other countries, championed and converted into a political asset. Brittany Lane, then manager of the OGP Local Program, invited Iași representatives to take part in the ceremony for welcoming new members. The reception was planned as part of the 2018 Open Government Global Summit, held in Tbilisi. However, both the mayor and the vice-mayor were unable to join and Iași was the only new member with no political representation at the Summit. A CIVICA member, acting as a civil society point of contact, symbolically received the welcoming trappings. It was at the Summit where OGP representatives once again reevaluated the option to exclude the city from the program, and once again decided to lend support and act humanly, instead.

A new plan was envisioned in order to unfreeze activities to form The Multi-Stakeholder Local Forum (MSLF) in Iași, an assembly comprising of citizens, public servants, local councilors, and various society key actors, appointed to oversee and coordinate the ulterior process of co-designing the action plan. In September 2018, Brittany Lane announced its work visit in Romania, hoping that her coming would speed things up. It did. A public event, coordinated by CIVICA and organized by the City Hall, was planned, as an introductory session on OGP processes and principles regarding transparency, participation, and urban co-management. The session was designed as both an introduction and a simulation of what was supposed to happen as a common activity for future MSLF members. Organizing this event also created the context for the City Hall to officially launch the call for MSLF formation. The communication officer of the City Hall was appointed to oversee the event, but also all OGP-related activities. Significantly, no administrative dedicated team was built and no dedicated time slots were reserved in the communication officer's regular working

schedule, to oversee the processes. However, working with a public servant who took personal responsibility to engage in OGP activities proved to speed things up and created a historical precedent in OGP culture. Commonly, members of MSLFs are openly but selectively selected by City Halls. The selectivity is more often than not a topic of debate in regards to who gets access to urban co-management and how socially needed and representative are projects created by groups of people filtered through top-down political veto processes. Under the coordination of the communication officer, backed by CIVICA support, Iași MSLF was the first of its type, created through open nonexclusive processes. Public announcements were made and direct invitations were sent. The high rate of positive responses was a welcomed surprise, given that public trust in political structures is very low in Romania and similarly if not lower in Iași.

Unfortunately, the short time given to finish the action plan didn't allow for multiple and extended networked working sessions, nor for multi-layered and multi-phased public consultations. Three projects were eventually shaped, presented, debated, and, finally, adopted by the City Council. However, as horizontal processes in co-developing the projects were severely affected by the short time, the projects didn't reach enough visibility to ensure mayoral commitment. An administrative *laissez-faire* approach, with no inhibitions, but also no championship, made so that projects' trajectories depend greatly on the commitment of their authors.

### **3. The first OGP local action plan for the 2019-2021 cycle in Iasi**

On the 24th of April 2019, the Iasi Local Council analyzed and voted on the three projects that were co-created by the representatives of the Iași City Hall and the members of the MSLF Iași during the period August – December 2018 (City of Iasi, 2019).

The commitments depicted a local interest in city branding promoting the Municipality of Iasi as a transparent and open city. Also through the Clean Iasi project and commitment, Iasi was described as having the capacity to change citizens' behaviors by enhancing selective garbage collection habits and reducing the amount of waste that harms the environment from an ecological and socioeconomic viewpoint. Last, but not least local commitment revealed “a mechanism to co-create solutions to public issues - Design4Community” which was intended to be a powerful instrument in promoting active public participation by bringing together individuals, experts, and public authorities to produce creative solutions for public concerns (City of Iasi, 2019).

The first project called *Branding the city: The democratic legitimacy of transparent governance* in the Iași Municipality, proposed the creation of a branding strategy for the city as part of a broader initiative to encourage public engagement and local government transparency. By using the intricate, healthy process of city branding it was intended not only to increase administrative transparency, but also to improve citizens' and stakeholders' connections to particular city projects, their progress, and future plans in areas of their interest while also preserving this particular relationship with the city through persuasion. The building of a smart city and the brand strategy is closely related (Visvizi & Lytras, 2019) and the positioning of the city through its features has a significant impact. The development of open data portals in areas of interest to many stakeholders (civil society, business, education, and tourism), together with the digitization of city policies and related public initiatives, could closely tie to the city's approach to the smart-city challenge.

The second initiative called *Clean Iași: 100% people, 0% waste* was built on the idea that public initiatives should be jointly created by institutions and the general public. At the same time, it was intended to give citizens the ability to affect change by empowering them to adopt responsible behaviors through public institutions, permit a transparent evaluation of impact, and in this way foster communication between citizens and public institutions in order to develop the strategy and action plan for the sanitation department, increasing its accountability and transparency (City of Iasi, 2019).

Clean Iași embedded several OGP standards such as expanding upon a comprehensive municipal plan like Zero Waste with community involvement while applying the co-creation principle to public projects and also allowing for a more transparent impact evaluation (City of Iasi, 2019).

The third project, *Design4Community* originated from the lack of a communication channel between the local public administration and Iasi's civil society (citizens, NGOs, the private sector, and academia), which affected both the identification, prioritization, and resolution of issues and projects in the community as well as the use of the expertise and know-how of the civil society to find and develop clever and original solutions in order to improve the quality of life for its members. Its main objective was to reinforce and set solid the fundamental principles of an Open Government Partnership by creating “a continuous, stable and predictable framework for productive collaboration between the citizens of Iasi and the institutions that serve them” (City of Iasi, 2019).

In this regard, an important task for civil society in the upcoming years will be to identify clear and concise modes of action and resources to

support open governance through institutionalized mechanisms that provide clarity and predictability by standardizing the public consultation process to prevent it from degenerating into a “mere formality” (Schmidhuber & Hilgers, 2021). Even though there are still no conclusive studies to gauge the extent of cooperation between local public administration and civil society, the absence of a reliable mechanism for collaboration frequently makes it difficult for people to understand and support some of the projects that the public administration proposes (City of Iasi, 2019). Even though this need is widely acknowledged, no real answers have yet been put up.

#### **4. Next steps in the development of OGP Local in Romania**

There were numerous attempts at the international level to establish some standards for institutional transparency. For example, Open Census, a tool used to compare the progress made by different cities and local areas in releasing Open Data (Open Census, n.d.) called for the publication by authorities of a number of different types of data and information, including organizational structure, local council activity, policies and initiatives to prevent corruption, lists of companies, budget, procurement, public consultation, and decision transparency, revenue, budget, sponsorship, instances of code of conduct violations, building information etc. As it has become increasingly clear that a number of clear publication and updating procedures are required, in a centralized system that is functional and easy to use for every citizen, litigant, or legal professional, the need to have data and information accessible at the click of a mouse has become more and more pressing in the context of pandemic limitations at the beginning of 2020.

Globally, in order to promote economic growth, innovation, creativity, and government openness, government agencies are creating online open government data (OGD) portals (Saylam & Yıldız, 2022; Gurin, 2014). Although this approach is currently slow in Romania, publishing open data controlled by public authorities and organizations on a working centralized national site or platform can be an effective and contemporary way to make data visible and accessible. Although the Romanian public administration is still hesitant to disclose public data and information and society is hesitant to use and re-use current data and information, there are practical models that may be easily applied in Romania (Onufreiciuc, 2021). Naturally, the success of the portal in encouraging and enabling the engagement of all social actors in the use of the released and updated datasets will also be crucial.

At the local level, there were several recommendations regarding the measures related to open data such as the “appointment of a dedicated

person responsible for publishing open data and for its constant updating inventory of the data sets with which the City Hall and subordinate institutions work” (Government of Romania *et. al.*, 2017). Moreover, without specific internal procedures on the methodology of data publication, the local mission of openness is even harder. In the future, it is of utmost importance that local authorities prioritize the publication of essential data sets such as “budget, budget execution; public procurement, building permits; transport timetable, public services - kindergartens, schools, parks, hospitals, etc. - permits for companies, public safety and crime, food safety, etc.” (Government of Romania *et. al.*, 2017).

Perhaps the first step is to compile and organize all datasets from public organizations and agencies that can be accessed on the [data.gov.ro](http://data.gov.ro) portal. To prioritize the publication of datasets based on user requests and provide a transparent method for gathering these requests, set up working groups and invite community participation. To promote and stimulate the use of available data and to find additional high-value datasets, it would also be useful to organize a national Datathon. The direct participation of IT professionals, lawyers, and citizens in general in competitions like this is a very appropriate opportunity to signal the ongoing need to publish and update public data and information in an accessible and transparent way, as well as an opportunity to show that their re-use is valuable and can result in sustainable change over the long and medium terms.

## 5. Conclusions

As many research studies show, as well as the experience of Iași as an OGP local partner, transparency alone, can build neither vivid public participation nor sustainable accountability among local representatives. Both access to information and transparency coupled with public-citizen co-working over long enough periods of time are necessary ingredients in order to change the status quo and disrupt historical behaviors of keeping civil society separated from public administration. Civil society partnering up with public servants may play a crucial role in opening local administration to prospects of multi-level governance, but without political leadership, bridges of trust remain fragile and related processes unfold much slower than optimal.

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