CeRe's projects and activities in 2015

External context

Most of the 2015 was generally a stagnant year in terms of development influencing activism. Last years' trends of increased interest for activism continued during 2015, with citizens being more willing to get involved in civic action. We witnessed (and supported) more groups of citizens getting involved in the decision-making process, more willingness to hold the public administration accountable and even some more openness from the state institutions. Citizens' activism was also encouraged by the anti-corruption actions taken by the National Anticorruption Directorate. People were encouraged in their efforts and started to believe that justice is possible seeing that many major public officials, who a while ago had seemed to be untouchable, were suspended or resigned or were even convicted.

If most of the year was rather calm, November brought about new turmoil: a tragic accident in a music club, with a death toll of more than 60 people, brought people on the streets again. The accident was a new occasion to discuss and protest about corruption and accountability (related to the anti-fire permit of the club and to the various safety evaluations they were supposed to pass). As a result, tens of thousands citizens took the streets to hold the Government accountable. The already weak government resigned and a technocratic cabinet was appointed (after negotiations among all major political parties). During the protests, the President had an unfortunate attempt to consult with NGO and "street" representatives. Letting that attempt aside, the new Cabinet brought about new players in the centre of the arena (many of them from the business sector). The new government also shows a new attitude towards civil society and a new Ministry for Public Consultation and Civic Dialogue was formed. Many of the ministries enrolled people from the NGO sector on different positions. Even if we take all these with caution, especially as 2016 is an electoral year, we recognize many opportunities and a generally more open environment to pursue our causes.

Another development that can (re)shape activism and participation is the new legislation for political parties that allows citizens to form a political party much easier. Even though there are still many obstacles and the already established larger parties are still favored in many ways, we can now say that new political actors can emerge into the political arena. It is too

soon to expect major changes for the next elections (the local elections are to be organized in June 2016), but, in the long run, it is expected that civic activists will use the new legislation as an opportunity to change the politics from inside. This is also taken with some caution, as not only "the good people" will probably want to form new political parties, but also extremists or others that might undermine the idea of a renewed political class.

Briefly about CeRe in 2015

2015 was a fruitful year for CeRe. We took the opportunity of the new enthusiasm around activism and participation and enhanced our efforts to support groups of citizens and NGOs in their advocacy campaigns. While still working individually with our beneficiaries we managed to make strong steps into laying the basis of a network of citizen groups to act at city level.

Even if most of the groups we supported were preoccupied by the public space and they were campaigning for issues related with urbanism, we were also able to work with groups and organizations preoccupied by social issues, such as housing or education for children in vulnerable areas.

Coalition building was another important approach of CeRe in 2015. We continued to facilitate the NGO Coalition for a fair use of Structural Funds and the younger, but successful platform Politics without Borders (*Politică fără Bariere*).

As strengthening civil society capacity is only one of the ends, we also put considerable effort in promoting the transparency and inclusiveness of state institutions (Bucharest Municipality especially).

All these experience was gathered into a new set of resources available to practitioners: a new Advocacy Manual, "How to..." briefs, a variety of case studies and success stories.

In our efforts to promote activism and share our own experience, we continued our community organizing exchange programme and offered various training sessions on advocacy, community organizing or coalition building.

Instruments to promote activism and participation were also a very successful 6th edition of the Public Participation Awards Gala and a PR campaign on public participation.

All of the above were possible thanks to individual and institutional donors, a few volunteers and board members, many supporters, and especially to a dedicated team of 14 staff members.



Advocacy assistance and community organizing programme

The goal of the program is to strengthen the voice of the citizens and NGOs in their efforts to get engaged in the decision-making process to solve communities' problems and hold state institutions accountable. CeRe supports the groups' advocacy campaigns but also their organizational development and helps them to get engaged with their own communities.

According to the needs of the beneficiaries and the available resources, CeRe's intervention is flexible and covers a large spectrum, from a complex assistance package employing community organizing methods to on the spot advocacy assistance when a group only needs a little advice.

In 2015 we've worked with 35 groups or individuals: 16 citizens groups, 7 individuals and 12 organizations. We supported their advocacy campaigns and also their development as community groups by:

- helping to enlarge their membership base and communicate with their constituencies,
- coaching groups to develop their structure
- helping to strategize and plan for their campaigns or for their future,

- coaching the groups to communicate with the state institutions or with media in their advocacy efforts.

Most of the advocacy issues pursued by CeRe's beneficiaries were focused on the public space (from illegal constructions to green spaces), but some on social justice as well: low participation of Roma women in the decision making process, poor access to education for children living in disadvantaged

communities, inefficient to inexistent public policy on social housing, lack of harm reduction services for drug users, better infrastructure in poor communities, preventing evictions etc.

By the end of 2015, the many of the groups coached by CeRe won their victories. Here are some examples:

• After a more than two year campaign, Iasi City Hall corrected their mistake of cutting 142 linden trees from the city centre, and bv November 2015, after a month of public consultation (the first in the city) they replanted over a 100 linden trees back on the main boulevard of the city The group Iașiul centre. iubește teii (Iași Loves the Lindentrees) managed not only to change an important public decision, but also to



create a wide civic spirit in the city and increase the level of transparency and collaboration of the local authorities.

- The civic group *Luptăm pentru Aleea Lungulețu* (We Fight for Lungulețu Street) managed to persuade the local authorities to stop the illegal construction of an 8-floor building in Bucharest, District 2, and has set a powerful example for other people fighting illegal constructions. Since then we had a lot of requests of assistance on this issue.
- *E-Romnja* organization and a local group of women from a small Romanian town (Mizil) have succeeded in convincing the City Hall to invest in improving the infrastructure of a poor Roma neighbourhood. The success was also in creating a powerful example of the change women can make in their communities.
- *Favorit* Group, after a 5 year long campaign, managed to persuade the central authorities to transfer the abandoned building of an old cinema to the local authorities and make the investment in a future Cultural centre possible

- ÎnCotroceni group succeeded in convincing the electricity company ENEL not to install
 - electric branches for each house on the fence, taking hence into consideration the protected area status of Cotroceni and not interfering with the architectural heritage of the neighbourhood.
- *Floreasca* group won a court trial against an investor



that built a block of flats on green space, without respecting urbanism and construction laws (Ghiță Pădureanu case). In the autumn of 2015, the construction of another building was postponed due to the pressure exercised by the group on Second District City Hall and the arguments provided by the citizens directly affected.

- *Prelungirea Ghencea Group* had several partial victories in 2015. First of all, the group negotiated with the General City Hall the way the infrastructure development in the neighborhood would look like. They managed to convince authorities to change the project, add bicycle lanes, wider sidewalks and only 4 traffic lanes instead of 6 initially foreseen for the widening of Prelungirea Ghencea Boulevard. They have also managed to stop for now the construction of a block of flats that is in the process of being built very close to a gas station, endangering the lives of the people living nearby and not respecting safety rules.
- *Lacul Tei* civic group gained back 11 ha for their local park. The group convinced the General City Hall to cancel a council decision from 2011 by which 11 ha of the Circus Park passed from local administration to the administration of the Circus. People feared that it was only a step in the attempt to start constructions in the park. Now, the 11 000 m² are back to Circus Park, back to the citizens of Lacul Tei neighborhood.

Besides the advocacy campaigns run in 2015, many of the civic groups developed from an organizational perspective, attracted new members, increased their visibility in the community, continued and developed new mechanisms of being in touch with their constituencies, developed new partnerships and drafted project proposals



in order to increase their financial autonomy. Just to give a few examples:

- Lacul Tei initiative group developed a neighborhood newspaper Foaia de Tei and, in
 partnership with StudioBassar Association developed Casa de Tei, an urban intervention project
 in the Circus Park serving as a meeting place and information point of the group. The same group
 wrote or was partner with other NGOs in 2 project proposals aiming at developing the
 neighborhood and building a community centre.
- Floreasca, Lacul Tei, Incotroceni, Favorit, Prelungirea Ghencea groups organized in 2015 neighborhood events in order to gain visibility in the community, attract new members, and collect needs and ideas from their neighbours. Approximately 1 100 persons attended those events, signed petitions of the groups, were informed of their actions and some of them subsequently become members or supporters of the groups.
- *Iaşiul iubeşte teii* group started an NGO (CIVICA Association) in Iaşi so that they could focus better on civic actions, and to involve more people from Iaşi in advocacy activities. They started to monitor the local budget and also the activity of the local councillors. The group was also actively involved the process of public consultations run by the city hall regarding the replanting of linden trees. 14,244 people voted. Some of the group members were exploring the idea of forming a political party.

Besides direct assistance for each group and organization, CeRe also offered learning and sharing opportunities to 17 civic groups and organizations on a wide variety of topics:

Organizational development:

- Lacul Tei civic group (March 2015) 16 members of the groups attended the meeting. Through mediation and discussions, an internal conflict was solved and the group resumed its activity.
- Prelungirea Ghencea civic group (November 2015) benefited from Dave Beckwith's expertise and managed to move forward with their intention of officially register as an NGO, and establish roles and responsibilities in the group.
- The Bucharest Civic Network (June, July, and November 2015) during the Citizen Initiative Fair, a side event was organized with approximately 30 members of civic groups where they first discussed the idea of joining efforts and laying the ground of a city wide network. The next month, 24 leaders from 12 civic groups established the mission, vision, values and objectives of the future Bucharest Civic Network. In November, with the help of David Beckwith, they continued the process.

Public Speaking

- In preparation of CeRe's Citizen Initiative Fair, 14 leaders from informal civic groups were better prepared to hold public presentations.
- > Fundraising
 - 17 leaders from 7 civic groups attended 2 fundraising workshops that aimed to give the groups the courage and know-how to start raising funds in their own community.
- > Advocacy
 - 15 members of 5 citizens groups and NGOs attended a 3 day training session that aimed to provide basic knowledge on advocacy but also the space to strategise and plan for their own campaigns.

Putting everything in figures, we ended 2015 with **35** groups supported, **over 300** people involved in leading advocacy campaigns, **over 50** public authorities targeted by citizens' actions, **over 6000** involved in advocacy activities, **over 280,000** citizens and NGOs members informed of the advocacy campaigns through our Facebook page, website and in over **100** media articles. To deeper illustrate CeRe's work with citizens groups two case studies written by Community Organizers are attached.

Bucharest citizen network

In 2015, we enhanced our efforts to bring together civic groups from Bucharest in order to lay the ground for a civic network that could act at a city wide level. In order to strengthen the connection between the groups, we organized several events and workshops, among which we can mention:

- Four civic groups worked together in 2015 to create a citizen newspaper *Cetăţeneşte-te* (Citizenize Yourself) – that promotes civic engagement and success stories related to citizen participation.
- *Luptăm pentru Aleea Lungulețu* group started a Civic Coalition on illegal constructions together with 3 other civic groups from Bucharest, District 2 in order to better fight against corruption in this sector.
- The second edition of the Citizen Initiatives Fair, organized In June 2015, brought together 14 informal civic groups and 9 nonprofit organizations interested in the development of the city. The event was open to the larger public and gathered around 300 visitors, including local public officials. The fair was the perfect opportunity to bring the topic of civic participation to the public agenda and to present successful and inspirational examples to a wider public. It

was also an opportunity for networking and sharing among groups and organizations that fight for similar causes, especially for the preservation of green spaces, infrastructure development, and against illegal buildings.

• A 2 day workshop in Predeal, in July 2015, with the aim to discuss the possibility of forming a coalition or a network of civic groups at city wide level. The gathering was a success, as 24 leaders from 12 civic groups attended the meeting and decided the form of their collaboration: they have established a network of support, drafted the mission, vision, values, and objectives of the network and some concrete steps for the next months. A testimony from one of the leaders of Prelungirea Ghencea Initiative Group: For our civic group, participating at this year's Fair meant teamwork, assumed and accomplished tasks and responsibilities and a feeling that we can rely on each other. At the fair, we found inspiration and resources and we were energized by our colleagues from other civic groups, which gave us strength to carry on. Delia Mihalache

- The Predeal workshop was followed by two other meetings, in November and December 2015 that focused on the network's organizational structure and short term objectives. The groups developed ownership, organized the meetings by rotation, and assumed responsibilities.
- The November meeting was also mixed with the first common solidarity action of the network

 representatives of 12 civic groups attended and publicly endorsed the protest initiated by
 Prelungirea Ghencea Initiative against an illegal building in the neighborhood.

Coalition building efforts

As voices are stronger when together, CeRe is putting effort in building and facilitating coalitions of NGOs when relevant.

The NGO coalition for the fair use of Structural Funds

Coordinating the coalition for structural funds is a well established effort of CeRe, aiming at keeping the Government accountable about the use of structural funds and at promoting civil society as an important actor in development.

In 2015 the coalition continued its efforts to monitor the management of structural funds and advocate for better inclusion of NGOs in the process. Regular meetings between Coalition members and Managing Authorities took place to discuss the problems encountered by the beneficiaries of funds and to find solutions. The coalition members gave feedback on all the relevant documents (strategies, call for proposals, implementation regulations, etc) and endorsed various recommendations. Besides, the coalition representatives are members in all relevant monitoring committees.

We also took time to learn and had two exchange visits, one with a similar network in Slovenia and one in Bruxelles.

Politics without Borders Platform

The restrictiveness of the political party legislation, making almost impossible for new actors to enter the political scene, was a topic that started to be (re)discussed by activists and NGOs during the national protests that took place in Romania during 2012 - 2013. A small group of activists and NGO members started to work together to advocate for improvements of the political party under the name Politics without Borders.

In 2015 the group has been consolidating both internally and externally. It increased its visibility, credibility and it is now a recognized actor when it comes to electoral matters, both for decision-makers and mass media. The most important achievement, from CeRe's point of view, is that it is still a functional group, in many ways. PwB holds weekly meetings attended by most of the members. CeRe's representative is facilitating these meetings, but members take rotation in organising meetings and following internal agendas. Most members participate in drafting documents, the working method is collaborative. Decision-making within the group follows rules adopted by the group after its experience at the beginning of 2015.



Open up the City Hall

During the summer of 2012 CeRe started Open up the City Hall campaign as a response to the decision of the General Mayor of Bucharest to forbid the citizens' access at the General Council meetings. This decision was very much in line with the Mayor's disinclination to listen to the civil society's opinions regarding the development of the city and with the misuse of public money.

At the beginning of 2015 we finalized <u>the research</u> on how decisions are taken at the Bucharest level. More than 200 decisions were studied, among them 49 were subject to an indepth analysis. Along with the research, an info-graph describing the decision making process was produced and became a civic education instrument.

The research represented the pretext for two series of working meetings with public officials. The working meetings brought together, for the first time, the executive team (the City Hall representatives), the General Councillors, the Prefect and representatives from the National Anti-Corruption Directorate from central level.

By the end of 2015, several results were achieved:

- The main one is that starting with December, 8 chairs for citizens are available in the General Council meeting room.

- An easier access for citizens to plenary and commission meeting from General Councils. At this point, online registration is possible and the procedures have been clarified in the new General Council internal regulations.
- the Councillors started to use the electronic voting procedure, making possible individual registration of votes. The electronic system was in-place since two years ago, but its utilisation was boycotted. Following our intervention, the councillors now vote on electronic machines.

The main change was that in a time of political uncertainty (the Bucharest Mayor has been charged with corruption accusation and two interim mayors have been in place since), the local politicians included on their agenda the issue of public participation.

Meanwhile, we started to extend our action at district levels. During 2015 CeRe researched the activity of the local councillors of the six districts of Bucharest as well as their transparency. The results of the research are to be launched at the beginning of 2016.



Politics without Borders

As mentioned above, Politics without Borders (PwB) is an activist platform addressing the restrictiveness of the political party legislation, making almost impossible for new actors to enter the political scene.

Following presidential elections in 2014, and the problems encountered by Romanians abroad to cast their vote, the main political parties decided to (re)activate a joint Parliament Commission on electoral legislation – mainly with the goal to change legislation so as to

allow distance voting. It was perceived by the civil society as a move to calm down spirits, only a PR move. But PwB took advantage of this moment in order to promote its agenda. So, following the group's discussions with political parties representatives, a series of events ensued that led to the consolidation of the PwB. Essentially

- In January 2015, PwB convinced the leaders of political parties to take into consideration changing the working scope of the Parliament electoral commission in order to include political parties law and political parties funding law,
- In February 2015, PwB delivered a presentation in front of the Commission with its main advocacy goals and its requests to relax political party formation and electoral reform,
- In February/March 2015 the Commission formally included in its mandate 2 additional laws for reform: political parties formation, political parties funding; the Commission promised to change local elections law by May 2015 (so as to be applicable for local elections in 2016),
- PwB made public all its discussions with members of the Commission and also pressured the very Commission to make public its working documents (most materials and documents were published on the webpage of the commission),
- Pwb attracted other civil society actors to get involved in the works of the Commission, thus adding pressure for the Commission to actually work instead of remaining inactive and only making political declarations,
- PwB forced the Commission to invite to its meetings all interested actors, other stakeholders and publish its meetings and their agendas in advance,
- PwB was invited by the President to a meeting in February 2015 on electoral reform and thus increased its public profile,
- PwB participated at most Commission and sub-commissions working meetings,
- In May 2015, 4 new laws that included input from PwB and other civil society actors were adopted in the Parliament: political parties' formation, political parties funding, local elections law, parliamentary elections law, respecting the constitutional calendar and promises made to civil society actors (so that the new laws can be enforced as of 2016).
- During May-June 2015, members of PwB organised public meetings around the country to inform citizens and politicians (mainly local) about the changes in the electoral legislation,

- Following the adoption of the aforementioned laws, in June July 2015, Pwb adopted new objectives, confirmed its membership (some members left, some others joined) and support, and adopted new rules for the functioning of the group. These meetings were organised and facilitated by CeRe's representative.
- In the summer of 2015, right before the parliamentary holidays, PwB organized a public debate to remind the Commission and politicians about their promise to adopt a law on distance voting. Following more pressure, at the end of October 2015 the Parliament adopted a new law on distance voting for parliamentary elections.

Currently, PwB is one of the public voices that have a say when it comes to electoral legislation, political media. **PwB** both for parties and mass site: https://politicafarabariere.wordpress.com/ (in Romanian), **PwB** Facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/PoliticafaraBariere

seen as a means to alter the balance of power in favor of those having less power.

Public Participation Awards Gala

The Gala is a traditional event of CeRe organized each year to gather enthusiasm around activism and participation to the decision-making process and to promote success stories and their actors.

In 2015 we organized the 6th edition: 300 participants and 150 online viewers celebrated the 10 winners in a very enthusiastic atmosphere. Among those awarded: a group of people in a village that convinced the Mayor to pave a road and repair a bridge, a group that persuaded the Ministry of Health to locate funds and purchase important drugs for cancer treatment or two groups of citizens that saved



their parks. For the first time, we had a dedicated award for one journalist involved in promoting

public participation stories. All the stories awarded were documented by journalists and included in a special supplement of a prestigious Romanian Magazine, "Decât o Revistă".

All of the winners benefited of a one day training on Story Telling provided by *Decât o Revistă* and 3 of them benefited of a study visit in Iceland, organized with the help of Citizens Foundation (Iceland). As the Gala is a very good pretext to promote public participation, a lot of PR efforts were made. As a result we estimate that 50,000 people were reached by a radio spot, around 50 media articles and interviews and direct communication.

Pubic participation awareness campaign

In 2015 CeRe developed its first professional awareness campaign under the slogan: "Demand for change. Get involved, your voice matters". The main objective of the campaign was to translate the concept and examples of public participation in an accessible language for the general public. The campaign used different channels: an online campaign (Facebook, Youtube channel, Google Ads), Media Relations approach, 4 dedicated videos promoted online, dedicated campaign web page, flyers, electronic media billboards, a doodling contest. It is estimated that the online campaign reached out to 295,000 people, while the offline communication reached out to 43,600.

Theatre Play - Raising awareness about civic participation

Another means to raised awareness about participation employed in 2015 was through a theatre play. The play writers and directors created the play based on the civic groups' experience both with public authorities and their constituencies.

The theater play 4m2 was staged 7 times in 2015 (in some of the neighborhoods we work in and on the stage of Mignon Theater) and was an opportunity to promote the initiative groups to a wider public, but also an opportunity to stir a debate about citizen participation.

The performances gathered around 500 spectators and reached an audience of aproximately 10,000 people through mainstream media and online channels.

I dare to say this play, meant to promote civic engagement, has equally the capacity to draw the larger audience to theatre. From the moment I was interviewed by the play writers until I saw the play staged, I admit I didn't expect such a great performance in "4m2". Ionuț Adrian Dinu, Callatis Initiative Group

US community organizing internship

Within a partnership with Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development, CeRe is recruiting and coaching potential community organizers and sends them in six week internships to

US NGOs. US community organizers are also travelling to Romania for short term visits to do trainings and consultancy with local groups, NGO representatives.

During 2015, 10 young professionals from Romania, actively involved in programs related to citizens participation, advocacy, civic education, community organizing were part of the Exchange program "Sustaining Civic Participation in minority communities". For 1 month and a half they have been to United States, where they gained knowledge of U.S. practices in citizen participation and advocacy, engaging minorities and marginalized populations in civil society and politics, collaborating with community leaders to inform changes in legislation that make a difference in minority communities (including roma, disabled, homeless, immigrants, LGBT) and build up grassroots democracy.

After returning, some of the people started to implement their own community organizing projects, based on the methodology learned in the U.S., having CeRe support and the network of U.S. Mentors. A few such examples are:

- "Campus Pride: Building Gay Straight Alliance Clubs in University Settings". The campaign was launched to mark Coming Out Day, and consisted in a week of events in celebration of Ally Week. Campus Pride is also part of an extended effort to create an LGBT community organization in Bucharest.
- "Give Voice to the Youth" Empowering the Roma youth from Chitila community through developing leadership skills and promoting community participation.
- Organizing Roma youngsters from Gârcini community, Brasov County to get a sport field from their town hall.

Besides the internship in the US, using the US mentors visits in Romania, CeRe organized 4 workshops for approximately 100 people interested in organizing and advocating for changing the balance of power in their communities.

Other training sessions or workshops on community organizing and advocacy

As CeRe became well known for its expertise in the area is often requested to facilitate advocacy planning workshops or trainings on topics such as community organizing, advocacy or coalition building. In 2015 organizing such gatherings became both a means to promote these methodologies and an income generating activity. Just to give a few examples:

- Basic Training on organizing for Youth Cancer Europe.

- Training on advocacy and strategy building for *Noi Orizonturi* (New Horizons) Foundation, who has an advocacy campaign meant to put non-formal education on the public agenda.
- Workshop on advocacy campaigns with over 15 youth groups from all over Romania. The youth groups run by the name of IMPACT Clubs and are organized by the *Noi Orizonturi* Foundation.
- advocacy training for Roma Social Inclusion Network
- Coalition building workshop for the Coalition for Children with Cancer
- Advocacy training for Roma NGOs active in de-segregation of schools

Providing Advocacy and community organizing resources

During 2015 CeRe developed a new package of resources available for practitioners:

- a new Advocacy manual inspired from our own experience;
- a set of "how to..." briefs;
- a large collection of case studies presenting and reflecting on successful community organizing and advocacy examples.

CeRe's participation in the European Community Organizing Network

In 2015, CeRe continued to be involved in events organized by the European Community Organizing Network (ECON) and benefited from the expertise of US community organizers and trainers. CeRe's community organizers and leaders from 3 civic groups (Favorit, Callatis, and LaculTei) benefited from training and sharing of experience at the ECON's Annual Meeting in Berlin (May 2015). In November 2015, CeRe staff and the network of civic groups benefited from the expertise of David Beckwith, former director of the Needmor Fund in the US, on topics related to organizational development and the way CeRe could/should be involved in the aftermath of the Colectiv tragedy in Bucharest.

* CeRe supports the organizational development of ECON and provides an umbrella for the network's fundraising efforts.

Participation opportunities for citizens - The need for culture in Bucharest peripheral neighbourhoods

Bucharest city, through the public institution that organizes and promotes cultural activities in the city – ARCUB, is taking part in the competition European Capital of Culture 2021.

ARCUB identified the need for understanding the way citizens consume and produce cultural activities at local level in their neighborhoods. Hence, they mandated CeRe to organize a series of consultations at grass root level to better understand the perceptions and opinions of Bucharest citizens on their neighborhoods.

During September – November 2015, CeRe formed a team of 8 researchers and community facilitators that started a research and consultation process in 11 neighborhoods. The process involved 21 consultations where approximately 250 citizens and 12 Citizens Initiative Groups attended. Most of the initiative groups helped us in organizing the consultation process and activated the community in joining the meetings. Based on this consultation process we have delivered a full report with a series of recommendations for ARCUB, in order to (re)activate the cultural and civic aspects of the Bucharest peripheral neighborhoods.