

CeRe – the Resource Center for Public Participation

2017 - Annual Report

External context

2017, the first post-electoral year in Romania, was full of political and social tensioned situations. The turmoil was mostly generated by hectic and some undemocratic decisions made by the ruling party (Social Democratic Party – PSD) in sensitive areas such as corruption and taxation. The common thread was the opaque decision making and the total disregard for participative processes, following a party agenda and not listening to any arguments coming from other sources.

A first attempt to modify anti-corruption laws, made at the beginning of the year, generated a wave of discontent that built on the already existing dissatisfaction with the current government. PSD and its Government were accused that they want to change the legislation, in a very non-transparent manner, just to clean corruption files for their party leaders (the president of PSD is accused in more corruption cases).

Large protests took over the streets all over Romania, for weeks. After weeks of protests, the Government decided to withdraw the ordinance modifying the Justice Laws and promised to put the modifications they were proposing in Parliamentary debate.



In the meantime, the ruling party was being dominated by internal struggles. The party asked for restructuring of its own Government and for the resignation of the Prime Minister. As the PM refused to resign, the ruling party published an evaluation of its Government, which scored many Ministers as incapable. After a Parliamentary procedure (motion of no confidence) launched by PSD against its own government, the Prime Minister is let go and the government restructured. A new Prime Minister is appointed (he was one of the former Ministers that had been scored 0 by the mentioned evaluation report). Almost the same scene repeated in early 2018.

After few months, the changes of the Justice Laws are launched again, this time in Parliamentary procedure. Even if many experts explained that many of the new modifications are welcomed, and only few are really affecting the anti-corruption policies, the general discontent led people to emotionally react again. The opposing reaction of the public was enhanced by the so called “fiscal revolution” announced by the government - poorly communicated and not debated what so ever.

The end of the year was as fretting as its beginning. Besides the amendments of the Justice Laws new modifications to the Penal Code were proposed. If experts said that not all the modifications for the justice laws were that bad, everybody agreed that the most of the modifications to the Penal Code were disastrous. Even the magistrates organized their own protests against the proposed changes of the Penal Code.

After smaller protests during the end of the year, a new larger gathering was announced for January 20th. Even if the large number of people protesting in the streets is a great news in terms of raising of activism, it is questionable if people will continue to engage when feeling that they are completely defied.

All this while the opposition parties were rather weak and did not get united. The National Liberal Party (the main opposition party) its known to have its own corrupt members to benefit from the measures proposed by PSD. Save Romania Union (the newest party, having many NGO members amongst its membership) tried to oppose as much as they could, but without much success. However, the unquestionable added value that USR brought was that of making the debates in the Parliament more transparent by broadcasting them live on Facebook, voicing the requests/slogans of the protesters from the street to the official debates etc. In this context, the activists in the streets remained the only real opposition.

The entire year, important social issues remained ignored by both society and political parties or government.

Civil society sector

2017 brought about extreme challenges for the NGO sector as well. The impact of these challenges is confirmed by the (not yet published) CSO Sustainability Index, which registers a decline on many sustainability dimensions for the NGOs in Romania.

On one hand, the systemic lack of resources deeply affected the sector. NGOs acting as service providers, as well as watchdogs and advocates were equally weakened.

On the other hand, the NGO sector was assaulted from other directions:

- A public discourse attaching “the foreign agent” stigma to the NGO sector. Such a discourse is generated by many politicians and disseminated by popular media outlets. There are strong attempts to describe some of the most relevant NGOs as being enemies of the nation, thus discouraging citizens to support and trust NGOs. Particularly the NGOs supporting the anticorruption processes are targeted as explicit enemies and are exposed to stigmatization campaigns by the politicians in power. The media campaigns targeted not only NGOs, but this time also individuals working for the NGOs.
- Formal and informal attempts to limit the freedom of peaceful assembly. Governmental officials publicly threatened activists to be fined during the recent protests that took place in Romania; the

City Hall of Bucharest refused to authorize some public assemblies under obviously farfetched reasons.

- Increased bureaucracy is intended, through a bill proposing new and burdening financial reporting requirements for NGOs, under the sanction of dissolution.
- Restrictions of the participation of NGOs to decision-making processes are intended, through a bill proposing new restrictive criteria for NGOs to become part in formal consultative structures.

We believe that shrinking space for civil society, as well as the rise of extremism and imminent threats to limit civil liberties (such as the upcoming referendum to redefine family) are not abstract threats happening in other countries, but current and strong pitfall we are experiencing in Romania.

We can now say that Romania is part of the global trend leading to a pushback against democracy and rule of law.

The end of the year found the large majority of NGOs incapable to imagine ways to act and react effectively to safeguard democracy and rule of law.

Despite all the above, the unformalized civil society (represented by both activists and on-line and off-line informal groups) continues to resist!

Activists spent many days and weeks protesting in the streets, while groups of citizens continued their advocacy efforts to advance their issues.

Unfortunately, there is very little support coming from the established civil society to help the unformalized one, and very few common efforts.

Even if activism seems to continue to grow, there are large categories of people, especially among those under-privileged and under-represented, which remain defenceless and unable to rise their issues on the public agenda.

Briefly about CeRe in 2017

With all the above mentioned tensions and obstacles, CeRe managed to keep up its work. Through our advocacy assistance and community organizing programme, we were able to respond to specific needs and to prove that even with a hectic government, citizens can still successfully advocate for their communities. We worked directly with more than **150 people** (offering mentorship, training, coaching, organizational development, mobilizing communities, planning the advocacy campaigns, drafting various materials, preparing for meetings with public officials, organizing events, protest, and other direct actions). Together with these 150 clients, around 6400 citizens got directly involved in different advocacy campaigns, and over 26.000 were reached through those advocacy actions.

While keep working at neighbourhood level on public space related issues, we focused more on supporting campaigns on social issues led by citizens or NGOs. Accesses to health services, the right to qualitative education for people in-need or reducing the food waste are few of the issues that our clients advocated for during 2017.

Building collective capacity for policy advocacy through investing in networks and coalitions of NGOs and activists was another focus of CeRe in 2017. Thus, we continued to work with the NGO Coalition for a Good Management of the Structural Funds, but also started two new endeavours:

facilitating a small network on housing justice in Bucharest and facilitating the Alumni Network – a group formed by activists that were part of our Community Organizing exchange programme with the US.



We also put considerable effort in promoting the transparency and inclusiveness of Bucharest City Hall and General Council. Witnessing the shrinking space for participation we worked with other NGOs to watch dog and advocate for better transparency in the decision-making process at city level. One of the most relevant achievements in this area is opening up the city council meetings for citizens to observe.

In our efforts to promote activism and share our good experiences, we continued our community organizing exchange programme with the US and offered various training sessions on advocacy, community organizing or coalition building. Instruments to promote activism and participation were also the 8th edition of the Public Participation Awards Gala, the 4th edition of the Civic Initiatives Fair.

CeRe's programs and results

1. Community organizing and offering advocacy assistance to citizens, groups, NGOs and networks so that they have the power to intervene in the decision/policy – making process.

The Advocacy Assistance and Community Organizing Programme

Through the Advocacy Assistance and Community Organizing Programme CeRe works to unlock and strengthen the voices of the citizens, civic groups and organizations from all over Romania in their efforts to get engaged in the decision - making process.

The purpose of the programme is to increase the advocacy capacity for citizens, civic groups, organizations and coalitions while also building their organizational development and helping them get their communities engaged.

No matter the issue on hand¹, or the level (local and national), we offer strong support to people running advocacy campaigns in order to solve communities' problems and hold state institutions accountable. 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 someone only needs a little advice. In line with our tailored assistance on advocacy and community organizing we try to put together our work experience in order to create better tools, offer workshops and create content on good practices.

In 2017, we have offered assistance to a total of **55** citizens, civic groups and organizations, as follows:

For 11 civic groups and organizations we have offered extensive assistance (ongoing support by a community organizer, organizational development, tailored workshops and learning opportunities, media and in some cases financial support). Some of the issues our clients worked on are: better health services in Roma communities, stronger communities, better infrastructure for a community at the margins of Bucharest, rehabilitation of a Summer Theatre, rehabilitation of parks, access to better education for poor and marginalized communities, preventing sexual harassment in universities in Bucharest.

Also, we continued to assist the development of the Bucharest Civic Network, a coalition of civic groups that supports each other's actions, and share information and know-how. The number of civic groups in the Network has now reached 18.

We have offered assistance for advocacy campaigns (constant support by a community organizer, learning opportunities, media and financial support) to 3 civic groups and organizations that engaged in advocacy campaigns meant to solve issues for their communities: stopping illegal buildings, better policies to avoid food waste, building of a community centre.



In 2017 the on the spot advocacy assistance has doubled since last year. All throughout 2017 we have answered to more than 41 specific requests on diverse issues such as: how to use 544/2001 law on public information, what to do when the institutions do not answer the 544/2001 law on public information, how to form a civic group or a civic organization, policies on gluten intolerance, changing the law on green spaces, pavement of streets by the City Hall, better infrastructure,

¹ CeRe has a firm set of values and we stand only by those issues that do not come in conflict with our values.

unresponsive city halls, how to do a petition, creating a crosswalk by the public institutions, abusive cutting of trees, etc.

All the types of support we have offered in 2017 meant that we worked directly with more than **150 people** (offering mentorship, training, coaching, organizational development, mobilizing communities, planning the advocacy campaigns, drafting various materials, preparing for meetings with public officials, organizing events, protest, and other direct actions). Together with the 150 clients, around **6400** citizens got directly involved in different advocacy campaigns, and over **26.000** were reached through those advocacy actions.

Here are some examples of the intervention we had in the programme:

Together with the **Association Partner for You** from Merișani commune (Argeș County) we have worked to improve the access of the **local community of Malu Vânăt village** (Merișani commune, Argeș County) to health services by empowering the citizens to monitor and advocate for their health-related rights and better health services. After a survey to established the main issues of health services accessing in the community, several events to inform people on their rights were held.

Along that, a lot of meetings with the local and county authorities took place (community health nurse,



the 2 local doctors, the priest, the local administration representatives and the National Health Insurance House of Romania (CNAS) Argeș County) in order to gain information on the services they provide and also to hold them accountable for the poor health interventions and healthcare services in the community.

Our long-term goal is to create a civic group with local community members, a group that will be strong and well informed in order to fight for their health rights.

Bucureștii Noi - www.gicbn.ro is a newly formed civic group to which we offered extensive assistance. They started meeting in fall 2016 and by summer 2016 they engaged 25 new members. They started with a community needs assessment to learn more about changes people wanted in their neighborhood, but also with a focus on the Bazilescu Summer Theater – an old building that used to be a central point for the local community. 533 people answered the needs assessment.

They created an advocacy plan for the rehabilitation of the Bazilescu Summer Theater: the group targeted the Ministry of Culture and the Local Council of District 1 and the City Hall of District 1.

They sent numerous written requests for public information about the official administrator of the Bazilescu Theatre, also regarding future plans for rehabilitation.

They sent a petition with 277 support signatures, asking for a rehabilitation plan for the building and a management plan with focus on community activities. They had several meetings with various public officials advocating for the reopening of the building. Meanwhile, they had several mobilization actions in the community and managed to attract 50 new people in the group by using a “first civic aid tent” as they named it in order to interact with local community face to face.

Prelungirea Ghencea a civic group we have worked with since their forming 5 years ago are advocating for numerous issues, out of which the most important are: the enlargement of Prelungirea Ghencea Boulevard (plus creating sidewalks, currently nonexistent, creating crosswalks, nonexistent at the moment, creating bicycle lanes); creating the city belt passage and creating a neighborhood park. In 2017, they sent numerous written requests to the new general city hall Mayor, but they were not successful.

So, in April 2017 they organized a protest with 1200 participants. The protest sent a strong message to the new mayor who responded in the same day with a public declaration stating that she will build temporary sidewalks until the major infrastructure project will start. The sidewalks were of poor quality unfortunately, so they easily got damaged. [This](#) short video of the protest depicts the power of the group to get their community engaged, their new skills as well as the community’s rage with the current situation.

They also had 2 meetings with the national Company for Roads Building that is responsible for building the City belt passage. The company signed the contract with the builder at the end of year 2017. They also tried to organize a second protest for the main boulevard but the notification was denied by the General City Hall, so they changed the protest into a neighborhood walk with 200 people.

The plan is to rethink their advocacy strategy and also to attract more people to their community organization.

After building and opening the Community Tei Center in November 2016, in 2017 **Lacul Tei Initiative Group** had an intensive program of increasing the activity of the community center and mobilizing the community through civic, cultural and educational activities: film projections, astronomy nights, contemporary dance, photo exhibitions, music events. The group initiated 2 community needs assessments, went into 3 public hearings with District 2 local representatives, started 3 advocacy campaigns (street sanitation issue, public transportation means, preventing the emplacement of a group of statues in the middle of a park), and organized more than 20 meetings with community members. As part of their advocacy campaigns, they wrote petitions, went to public hearings, organized protests until they reached their goals – approximately 30 garbage bins were installed; the statue of Monaco Prince wasn’t installed in the middle of the park on the green area. In all these activities, more than 4 000 citizens were involved.

The presence of the community center in the neighborhood increased the visibility of the group; the membership in the group just skyrocketed. This model is encouraging other initiative groups in

Bucharest to start similar steps in opening community centers in their neighborhoods. The Community Center together with Lacul Tei Initiative Group can be seen as a space for civic engagement transfer, as a tool for multiplying and amplifying the resources in the neighborhood. The community center plays now a central role in building the sense of community.

It is worth mentioning that in June 2017 Lacul Tei Initiative Group was awarded at Civil Society Gala with Special Prize “Dan Manoleli” for contributions brought to the development of civil society in Romania.

Members of the **Incotroceni group** concentrated their efforts in convincing the local authorities from District 5, to involve the community in the process of rehabilitating Romniceanu Park, to listen to their needs and to implement their ideas in the final solutions. Meetings with the mayor were established, 2 community needs assessments were organized – around 100 people joined. A report was sent to the local authorities along with a petition signed by approximately 300 people (during the Cotroceni Neighborhood Day) through which people were asking again the local authorities to involve them in all the stages of the rehabilitation and modernization of Romniceanu Park (feasibility study, acceptance of work, etc.). Many public information requests concerning the park were sent to local authorities. It seems that the group efforts were futile, because in December 2017, the local authorities without any note decided to build a skating ring in the middle of the park and immediately they started the construction.

Citizens in the neighborhood just outburst when they found out they were misled by the local authorities. They have organized a protest, went to the local authorities to ask for explanations, sued them, made many complaints to different institutions as the building yard was illegal (having no authorizations).

The subject was very present in the mainstream media during holidays, and since the public pressure was high, everybody watching the case, the local authorities were finally convinced to back up with the skating ring. Now the group and Cotroceni



community are concentrated again in determining the district 5 authorities to work together in the process of rehabilitating the park. The victory brought a lot of visibility to the group, power, trust, a strong connection with the community and money (one man from the neighborhood donated to the group 2300 Euro).

Floreasca Initiative Group started 2017 with many internal disputes over the leadership, the membership, the way decisions are being taken and over the way the community should be involved in the decision-making process. The group had an internal crisis and CeRe worked on overcoming it.

After many one on one's, group meetings, emails, internal struggles, mediation and many days of consultation the group decided to split in two: Floreasca Initiative Group remained with the old leadership, while the others decided it's time to move forward and start a new group.

Since Floreasca Initiative group (old leadership) failed to consult and involve the community in the developed activities and work in a democratic way, we decided not to continue to support them.

We offered our assistance to the new formed group – **Floreasca Civică**. The focus was to help them build a strong group - working on rules, operating mechanisms, group identity (logo, motto, name, Facebook page, folding presentation, neighborhood newspaper) – besides the support on the advocacy campaigns (focused on illegal buildings and green areas in the neighborhood – Verdi Park).

Between March and October 2017 the members of the group **Floreasca Civică** sent more than 10 letters to the District 2 City Hall, the Public Domain Administration, Traffic Police Department, District counselors, Parliament and participated in 6 meetings and public hearing with different public stakeholders (4 public hearings at the District 2 City Hall, 1 meeting with the Agency for Environment Protection, 1 meeting with Architects Association of Romania (OAR) in order to raise the awareness on the neighborhood problems.

Concrete wins of the group worth mentioning:

- during the cleaning and sanitation day in the Verdi park, the Mayor of the District 2 City Hall, came and talked with the members of the civic group and the residents, and signed the petition. The mayor made the promise to take all the necessary actions to preserve the Verdi Park.
- Garibaldi 26C – an illegal construction was stopped. The Court verdict was in favor of the citizen so the building agency had to interrupt all the constructions, moreover to pay all the damages. The case was a successful, positive precedent which encouraged other citizens to be more involved and solidary with the group's actions.

Specific victories aside, most of CeRe's clients are now better equipped to keep public authorities accountable, to engage their communities or communicate with different stakeholders. They are more aware of their collective power and not afraid to voice their requests

The Civic Network of Bucharest (RCB) was created in 2015, with the occasion of the 2nd edition of our Civic Initiatives' Fair – the network was started with a vision of mutual support through joint actions and peer learning, and was formed by 11 informal initiative groups.

Currently, the Network consists of 18 civic groups: <http://reteauacivica.ro/>. At the requests of some network members, CeRe facilitated 3 planning meetings of the network. The agenda of these working meetings included:

- The first meeting: RCB objectives and actions. They decided they were going to start working on some basic instruments they need in order to be more effective as a network. Also, they have decided on 11 objectives such as urban development, transparency, public transport, perseverance of the green spaces, lakes) etc.

- The second meeting was used to further the conversation about possible actions they might engage in as a network and establish working teams to advance with their internal organizing efforts.
- The third meeting was dedicated specifically to the development of some specific documents: membership form, values, and mission, a proposal for a possible internal structure.

Apart from this work, RCB was CeRe's partner in organizing the Civic Initiatives Fair 2017 edition. They participated to the logistical efforts, invited public representatives and promoted the event in their communities.

We need to mention here that, if at the beginning of the year we were very optimistic about the network's potential to become a strong advocate at City level, throughout the year we discovered that the members are not that motivated in that direction. Even if many plans were developed by the members, the network ended up by being rather a space for mutual support then for collective action. To clarify what we can achieve by supporting the Bucharest Civic Network, a participatory assessment of motivations and possible directions will take place at the beginning of 2018. Our future support and goals for the network shall be reshaped accordingly.

2. To facilitate the exchange of experience among more experienced groups, organizations and individuals and those in need to get inspiration or knowledge

Peer to peer mentoring

As part of our strategic planning for the Advocacy Assistance and Community Organizing Programme we encouraged peer to peer mentoring and learning. Some of the more experienced civic groups offered support to either citizens or civic groups that were at the beginning of their journey or had similar actions and needed advice.

For example, Lacul Tei Civic Group, one of our most experienced groups, offered support and advice to people from other neighbourhoods from Bucharest (Socului area, Baicului, Obor) that wanted to start similar movements in their community and didn't know exactly how.



Also, leaders of the Lacul Tei Initiative Group organized a meeting with newer initiative groups (Iancului Civic Group, Floreasca Civica, Aleea Lunguletu) from District 2, Bucharest and other interested citizens with the purpose of establishing a meeting with local authorities to discuss about the common problems they are facing in the district. The focus was on: green spaces, collective garbage collection, parking lots, noise problems and the problems related with the depleted lakes.

And in 2017 the group had a sharing exchange visit to another civic initiative from the city of Cluj Napoca in Romania.

One of our civic groups – We fight for Aleea Lunguletu – who worked on an issue regarding the illegal build of a block of flats in their community, offered advice and information to other citizens and groups from Bucharest regarding this topic.

Community organizing internship program

In 2017 CeRe in partnership with GLC Teach Democracy continued the work in preparing young leaders to embrace the methodology of community organizing and to become meaningful participants in democracy. The exchange programs financed by State Department “Sustaining civic participation in minority communities” (2016 – 2018) and “Shaping Participatory Democracy” (2017-2019) brought people to work together, trained and gave them opportunities and tools to speak out and make a difference for the society.

In 2017, out of 45 recruited and coached young professionals working in various fields connected with social change, 12 were selected for a 6 weeks internship stage to U.S. community based NGO's where they had the opportunity to learn about the tools and practices that can sustain civic participation and build powerful local organizations. This manifold experience (trainings, meetings, peer to peer learning, networking and work on the ground, etc) gave the participants in the program, not only the power to produce change but also the strength to train others (colleagues, volunteers, ngo professionals, community leaders, activists) to address local needs, to solve problems, to identify leaders, to build and activate communities.

The alumniees in the program came back home „fired up and ready to go”, ready to be part of the change they believe in. They came back determined to unlock the power of the underserved, voiceless people, to those oppressed by systemic injustices.

Here are some of their testimonials, speaking better than we can about programme's results:

“Since coming back from the Fellowship program in United States, I kept working with people from Poiana Negustorului in Bacau county, to increase the quality of education that the children receive in the local school. With fresh forces and new skills, working step by step, the work that had been done, started to show results. We started to meet again and planned the next steps to improve the quality of education that the children receive in school. The members of the community were not pleased with the shape of the school building. The space is insufficient for all the children, the walls are dirty and in bad shape and during the winter, the heating system is not efficient enough, reason why many students are not attending school during the winter months. We organized common meetings with local authorities, with school principal and community group members and started to discuss about all these problems. When people heard that the mayor is going to be present, more members of the community attended to the meeting.” (F.P)

„Gender Talk initiative has been slowly developing and gathering more people around it, in its core team, but also community members attending the events. Mustafa's visit and the training was very useful because it gave participants a new perspective on organising, especially since new people attended and they were able to form a base of knowledge that will support their further work. The core team was joined by 4 new people that started getting involved after attending Mustafa's training. In this new team we have started working on internal aspects of our group and slowly putting into place

some ways of functioning, defining the roles in the team, and slowly figuring out a way of working. We also started working our identity and collaborating with a pro bono visual artist that can transcribe our vision into visuals. One of our newest team member had started developing a website for our initiative. And other 2 are exploring developing a podcast to have more conversations around the topic of gender.”(D.P.)

„Since my return from the United States, I continued my work with LGBT high school students. During the summer months, with the help of my mentor, Noreen Giga from GLSEN, I collected data for a national web survey aimed at evaluating the school climate in Romania for LGBT youth. We managed to exceed the target for number of answers, and by November, we made a preliminary report. The data confirmed the issues I uncovered working with a local group of LGBT high school students in the past year. There are concerning levels of homophobia in Romanian high schools. More specifically, some of the main issues were: teachers bullying pupils, a lack of reporting in cases of violence and/or harassment and colleagues outing LGBT students. These lead to LGBT students feeling unsafe in school, underperforming and even missing classes. The efforts of the Coalition for Family to ban same-sex marriage in the Constitution had an effect on students as well, as they perceived an increase in the level of violence against them and some of them reported on teachers collecting signatures for the referendum and promoting conversion therapy in school.” (A.P.)

„After we ran the community meeting with 4 local councilors and a vice-mayor from different political parties, we invited all politicians to clearly express their availability to support the community’s proposals or, otherwise, to offer a clear justification for their refusal. Among 40 participants, 9 proposals were presented. The youth was interested in Mobility and Hospitality, in Environment Friendly Behaviors, Cultural Activities, and Open Institutions.” (R.O.)

„As one of my very best international experiences, the 2017 Fall Professional Fellows Program offered me the opportunity to understand that migration and human trafficking are common challenges all over the world, but they are approached in a different way through more or less developed institutional systems. The two months of training and professional experience in New York City, Toledo, Chicago, Seattle, and Washington helped me to realize how effective is the power of people in a traditional democratic system and how efficient could be the method of community organizing for identifying and solving human rights issues in a sustainable way.

The alumni efforts in working for their causes were supported by their U.S. mentors that came to Romania (in 3 different delegations) to help them closely through peer consulting, trainings, developing new tools and strategies. Beside working with the Romanian Alumnies, the 10 US mentors went to meet with different NGOs, students, communities and held workshops, trainings and presentations for them on topics related to their interests.

While working with the 2017 alumni, the internship program keeps involved the last years’ generations of alumni. Many of them developed successful projects such as:



In Valea Seaca (rural area), roma women organized themselves to put a stop on violence against women, reclaiming their rights to

safety. Health and education interventions were planned in Craica Roma community. People were prepared to ask the local authorities to find housing solutions and access to utilities. They became a symbol of hope for other communities in the regions that are facing similar issues. Tandem organization made huge efforts to make visible the visual impaired community and through education trying to change the narratives describing a minority such as the blind both from inside and from outside. An awareness campaign (in 5 cities and 3 villages) was developed in order to inform people about the risks they are facing when ignoring the human trafficking practices when looking for a job. Efforts were made to increase the level of participation among Roma youth for getting involved in solving community issues.

For the new exchange program „Shaping Participatory Democracy” along Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary, Albania joined in. CeRe staff was appointed to held a introductory training in community organizing in Albania for the 20 Albanian people that have applied for the 2018 internship. We have also continued the trainings in Romania for the 25 people that have applied for this new exchange program.

Stronger citizens, stronger democracies – sharing of experience among Romanians and Ukrainians

Within a partnership with Institute Respublica (Ukraine) six citizen-led groups (three in Romania and three in Ukraine) were strengthened and assisted to conduct civic actions and run advocacy campaigns in order to pursue the authorities to solve various community problems.

Three study-exchange visits were organized in Kiev and in Bucharest with the participation of citizens, NGO representatives, journalists and authorities (two vice-mayors from Ukraine). The visits in Romania included meetings with national and local authorities such as Public Consultation and Civic Dialogue Ministry; European Funds Ministry; 5th District City Hall, Bucharest; Department for International Relations, Culture, and Events from Brasov City Hall. During these exchanges the counterparts learned about each other's legislation which enables citizen's participation in decision making; got acquainted with the authorities practice and used tools to consult public opinion; and better understood how the citizens, civic groups, using elements of community organizing, establish the dialogue with the authorities and hold them accountable.

3. Strengthen NGOs' and activists' capacity to contribute to the policy-making through coalition building

The Alumni Network

Since 2012, CeRe has been managing a fellowship program in which Romanian activists and organisers have the opportunity to spend 6 weeks in the US to learn community organizing (see above). Until now, 50 people took part of this program. In the end of June 2017, after the return of the Spring delegation from the US, we decided to start an intentional process of developing a community of Alumni.

All those who were part of the program were contacted and asked if they would be interested to build something together and continue learning and sharing with their peers. We received very positive

answers and thus started to organise monthly meetings with the Alumni community. Starting July until the end of 2017 we organised 7 meetings with 5-12 participants attending regularly and 3 in depth 1 on 1 meetings with Alumni. The meetings focused on getting to know each other and our work, sharing different methods we have used in our projects or in our fundraising efforts, planning joint activities or the development of the network, and training and recruiting the next delegation of fellows for 2018. We also developed a questionnaire to assess the needs of our community, and make sure we hear everyone's opinions even though they were not yet able to attend monthly gatherings. 27 people responded and gave very valuable information for our development process. Many of the Alumni are interested in cooperation, mutual support, continuing to learn and improving their organising skills. As they are all working in the social justice field, another common point we found in their answers is the need for developing a value based community that offers space for personal and professional growth. Encouraged by the alumni interest, we decided to invest more in such a network in the years to come. Thus, we already started planning a national Alumni reunion for March where. The event will be a space to build upon all those discussed in monthly meetings and come up with concrete action plan that will guide our work.

Housing

Following the unexpected eviction of several residents of a shelter for homeless people that called our attention and intervention, we have slowly increased our involvement in the field of housing justice.

We started to build our knowledge and understanding of the very complex topic of housing through requesting public information from authorities, especially the Municipality of Bucharest and the 6 District Halls. We've realised that Bucharest is not yet ready to tackle the crisis of homelessness, social housing or public housing that has been developing for years now. We have one of the highest number of homeless people in Europe yet we only have a couple of hundreds of beds available for temporary shelter, and very little means for holistic support for those in need. We have witnessed many forced evictions, especially on wintertime, that left families on the street for months, transforming autonomous people into state dependent ones. Public authorities in charge with housing patrimony are not transparent, and there is a general lack of understanding of available social houses and a very difficult process to obtain them.

In the same time, we witness the sporadic efforts of few interested NGOs to tackle the issue, on different levels.

We realized that we have many knowledge gaps missing from creating a whole picture of this big field, and that at this point in time it is very difficult to create big structural changes, especially without a group of committed activists. Nevertheless, we decided that we are in a good position to bring together those with experience in housing justice and see how is it that we can facilitate some collective efforts to advance this topic on the public agenda. While monitoring the activities of the General Council of Bucharest Municipality, we discovered that there was a proposal for modifying two criteria from the scoring list for obtaining social housing. We saw this as an opportunity for interested NGOs to come together and promote a more inclusive and connected to the needs update, and thus requested postponing this change and organising a participatory process for improving the list together with NGOs in the field. We managed to gather 5 other NGOs at the table, planned our requests, and then organised a meeting between us and some of the relevant authorities in the field such as General Counselors from Patrimony Committee, Health and Social Protection Committee, The Committee for evaluating unusual social situations in which Bucharest citizens are, The Administration of Real Estate Fund, Social Work General Department of Bucharest Municipality.

We consider that a first attempt to facilitate a possible future network to work together on housing justice.

NGO Coalition for Structural Funds

Since 2006 CeRe is working with a group of 35 NGOs aiming to contribute to the policy-making in the area of European Funding for Romania.

In 2017 we continued our work of consolidating the Coalition and facilitating its advocacy efforts. One important challenge that we faced had to do with the general state of the NGO sector in Romania. Reduced resources meant less capacity to react and to focus on long term advocacy issues. It is also important to mention that part of the experts we have mobilized for the subjects concerning the EU Funds management in Romania in the past have left the nongovernmental sector and went in for profit institutions.

Lack of governmental stability (4 Prime Ministers in 2016 – present day period) had an impact on multiple levels. European Structural Instruments management in Romania proved to have similar delays as the previous programming period. It is a problem for the national objectives and citizens that should benefit from them, especially for the soft interventions (social issues, education, occupation, health etc.), and it is a problem for the potential applicants that cannot conduct their activity. The main Operational Program that targets disadvantaged communities (Human Capital OP) has had a very difficult start. For instance, the Managing Authority was recently certified by the EC, in August 2017, two and a half years later than it should. All payments so far on this OP (0.17 % of the allocation) have been made from the national budget contribution.

Relevant calls for proposals were also delayed and the evaluation period lasted in some cases almost one year. For example, the call regarding the Integrated Local Development in vulnerable communities (Human Capital OP) had the August 1st, 2016 as deadline, winning projects were announced on May 12, 2017, and projects were contracted in August 2017.

Starting 2017, CeRe leads a large research on the impact of EU funding instruments on marginalized communities. IT is a matter of interest for us not only from the Coalition's members' point of view, but also because there are new and integrated funding instruments that we want to analyze. Our research is conducted at central level and locally, in 10 vulnerable (mostly Roma) communities.

Advocacy efforts of the Coalition during the last year covered:

- Lack of transparency,
- Unpredictable funding calendar,
- Specific issues regarding education, occupation, administrative reform and social economy calls for proposals,
- Unnecessary and burdening bureaucracy,
- Financial challenges like the new fiscal measures that cannot be transferred in the financial management of the EU funded projects etc.

One core observation for the past year's Coalition activity is that authorities simulate public consultations but the amount of information that they process and integrate is actually small. We had meeting and debates up to EU Minister and yet, measures were still delayed or absent.

We have started an internal effort of rebuilding the Coalition as a stakeholder, programming a new strategy making effort for the following months.

5. Watch-dog and advocacy for better public participation in the decision-making²

Open up the city hall!

During 2017 CeRe has continued its watch-dog activities regarding the lack of transparency at Bucharest level. With a new Mayor in place since July 2016, the decision-making process at the City Hall of Bucharest was even more opaque than it used to be. Together with partner NGOs we monitored all the council meetings, encouraging other activists to do the same.

The first year of the new local administration was analyzed in a report released by CeRe and two other partner NGOs. Launched in a non-formal manner in front of the City Hall, with a good crowd of activists around, the report got good media coverage and brought the topic on the agenda. The main findings were:

- Only 3% of the public decisions were made after public consultations (as Law requires);
- The citizens access to the local council meetings was forbidden, as it was the possibility of citizens to address to the council during its meetings;
- Even the debates among councilors were restricted;
- New tactics to restrict the right to free assembly were employed by the new administration.

In terms of public agenda, the report shows that the Mayor and the new council were merely preoccupied to reorganizing the institution and to offer the citizens of Bucharest plenty of entertainment: each month Bucharest had at least one spectacle, contest or festival. In the meantime,

substantial problems, such as housing or public transportation remained completely ignored.



Yet, a noteworthy victory was achieved: a group of activists literally forced their participation to the Council meeting. The event caught a lot of media attention. For the next couple of meetings, the administration tried to restrict the participation again, but worrying about a new scandal, finally they decided to open up the meetings. Now, anyone can freely assist to the Local Council meetings.

² CeRe is familiar with the restrictions on using Mott funds for lobbying. We have understood and accepted these restrictions and will cover the cost of these activities from other sources.

Next on our agenda is the citizens' right to address the council and the city hall legal obligation to put its the decisions in public debate. Another aim we have is to monitor and expose the city hall practices to restrict public assemblies.

Participatory budgeting

Few City Halls in Romania have started to explore participatory budgeting as a means to increase citizens participation to the decision making. Yet, we noticed important flaws in the process:

- Complete lack of deliberation (only on-line submission of ideas and on-line voting);
- No intention to use the process for an equitable distribution of resources;
- No community building around the process – as the budget ideas are expected to be submitted by individuals and there is not facilitation involved.

CeRe put together and released a Brief pointing out some of the flaws of the process, recommending improvements and indicating useful resources. As a result, some local councilors around Romania (mostly representing USR) asked for our advice on how to better organize participatory budgeting in their cities. Moreover, the Ministry for Public Consultations decided to promote a set of recommendations on the topic and invited CeRe to be part of a working group to develop a good practice guide on participatory budgeting.

5. Promoting public participation and activism

Public Participation Awards Gala

“It is like the Gala brought me closer to the light at the end of the tunnel. And, once I started to see the light, it was clear that we have a tunnel that at least is under construction. And I could see the sweat of the people that are building the tunnel, so that all of us can finally see the light of the sun. It is very good to know that people are building the tunnel, and that there are more and more of them, with better and better tools.” (A. G., participant)

Every year we award the most inspiring and powerful public participation stories submitted into the competition. In 2017 we organized the VIII edition of the event and brought into the spotlight [12 campaigners, groups and organizations](#) that successfully challenged the state institutions to solving different problems in their communities. Same as in the previous editions, we offered the stage to those committed citizens and organization who got engaged in advocacy campaigns and mobilized people and public decision makers for the welfare of communities. The campaigns awarded focused on topics like: environment, health and educational systems, or social housing.

A lady from Arges County determined the mayor to clean the local public sources of water. The Student Association from Constanta succeeded to pursue the Ministry of Education to provide free of charge manuals for college students. A NGO discovered that the Bucharest City Hall had the intention to spend an overestimated budget on medical equipment and after a flash advocacy campaign saved 5 million Euros from the public budget.

All Gala's awards spoke about the courage and tenacity of those people who decided to overcome the belief that their rights and civic actions will be ignored by public administration. They are the fuel for mobilizing their neighbors and key decisions makers and solve different problems in their communities. In the context of the large protests in 2017, we also tried to spread the message that protesting in front of the Government is of huge importance, but as important are the smaller, local campaigns led by citizens in their communities.

300 participants attend the event (journalists, NGO representatives, politicians, citizens, bloggers, local and central public administration representatives, corporate and business representatives). A viewership of 14,000 visitors was registered by the live facebook broadcast of the Gala.

50 online media articles, radio and TV interviews spread the word to a viewership of 83,000. 231 posts on facebook (CeRe and external pages) reached to a 226,000 viewership.

This short [movie](#) and the [photo-gallery](#) shows a little bit of the energy of the event.

The event gave a lot of inspiration and enthusiasm, as confirmed by the positive feedback we got from participants. To quote two of them:

"It is like the Gala brought me closer to the light at the end of the tunnel. And, once I started to see the light, it was clear that we have a tunnel that at least is under construction. And I could see the sweat of the people that are building the tunnel, so that all of us can finally see the light of the sun. It is very good to know that people are building the tunnel, and that there are more and more of them, with better and better tools."

"Tonight I was for the first time at the Public Participation Awards Gala. [...] It was literally the best event I have been attended in a very, very long time. As people previously had told me, it is an event to which you go maybe a little tired, or discouraged, or doubting about our chance to a better life, but from which you leave full of energy, and proud and also astonished that there are so many cool people in this country. And you leave asking yourself what can I do, in my small way, to help my country to



become better, not only for me, but for all of us. And the conclusion I got is that each small thing counts. Not all of us can be full time activists, but all of us have the duty to get involved, as little as we can. [...]"

The enthusiasm for the gala was also proved by the number of donations we received right after the event.

We also had a very positive feedback from the organizations and groups awarded. Many of them received the award as a strong sign of appreciation but also as an encouragement for future actions. To quote Catalin Tenita, who received the special award for activism: *"It is a symbolic award, given to some sort of an unknown hero, named the one that starts to become an involved citizen. He is the one that until a year or so ago, was only preoccupied by his work, honestly and professionally, but he is the one that now starts to realize that, even if it is uncomfortable, he needs to start to fight."*

The Civic Initiative Fair

Another event to promote activism and grass roots advocacy was the Civic Initiative Fair (the 4th edition in 2017). The Fair promoted the idea that citizens, together with groups and NGOs can have a significant impact on solving community problems through participation in public decisions process. Citizens from 18 civic groups, organisations and communities had the opportunity to tell their stories of civic involvement and raise awareness on subjects of common interest for Bucharest inhabitants.

More than 110 persons visited the stands and stepped in dialogue with the members of the civic groups. During the session "Dialogue with the authorities" the citizens had the opportunity to directly discuss about their concerns with 9 public officials.

The fair was promoted through all CeRe's communication chanel (Newsletter, web site, facebook) and had a good visibility within online media and radio ([Dilema Veche](#), [Iqads](#), Radio France International Romania - RFI, Radio Guerilla) . We had a radio spot promoting the event which was



produced and broadcasted by RFI. We also collaborate with a video producer for recording the event's aftermovie and video interviews with all citizens, groups and organisations invited at the fair – [video gallery on the event FB page](#).

Financial resources

2017 was a challenging year for the civil society organizations in Romania in terms of financial resources, for CeRe as well. The lack of resources was deepened by the postponement of the disbursement of the EEA Grants for NGOs – the biggest donor for organizations in our field of



activity. With all the shortcomings, we managed to have revenues of US 223,159.19. Approximately 13,000\$ were generated by alternative fundraising (individual donors, companies, income generating activities).

Thank you for reading!