

The Resource Center for Public Participation

Annual Report – 2019

Overview

The external context

2019 was a hectic year in terms of Romanian politics. Yet, the context for civil society got improved.

During the first few months of the year, the attempts of politicians representing the ruling party to discredit the NGOs and the opposition, and to deteriorate the legislation continued on the same well-known trend.

Yet, internal scandals within the ruling party and the focus on European elections led to more urgent problems than bashing the civil society. The main scandal that kept the ruling party busy was the corruption trial that finally led to the imprisonment of their leader (right after the European Elections in May 2019). The Court sentence for the party leader, accompanied by the party's unprecedented low score in the European elections led to struggles for power within the party.

The Presidential elections held in autumn were also won by the opposition, represented by the former President who kept his position.

We had a good voter turnout for both European and Presidential elections, yet voters gave a rather negative vote in favour of the opposition, mobilized by deep anti-establishment and anti-corruption feelings. Once again, we had two electoral campaigns having corruption and

efficiency of the government as the central topic. With an opposition mainly situated on the right side of the political spectrum, social issues were addressed only marginally.

Very soon after the presidential elections, the opposition (the National Liberal Party and Save Romania Union), even though they still remained a minority in Parliament, they managed to put in place a new Government representing the National Liberal Party.

Meanwhile, the opposition was not short of internal struggles and scandals.

In terms of civil society and activism, as already mentioned, the threats coming from politicians and government diminished substantially, thus a much favourable external context is now in place. Of course, as has happened many times before, we know we cannot expect it to last forever.

Activism and citizens' participation appear to be stagnant. Even if issues that could have triggered serious participation occurred throughout the year, people did not seriously mobilize in other ways than on social networks.

If the general political context was much more favourable for NGOs, the same cannot be said of the financial resources available. Very few institutional funding sources were available for NGOs during 2019, especially for those in the area of advocacy or human rights.



Illustration by Dan Perjovschi

Briefly about CeRe in 2019

Given the external context in the last couple of years, threatening to participation and activism, CeRe continued **to facilitate a large and diverse coalition to protect and expand civic space**. In the first part of 2019, we were mostly preoccupied to prevent the deterioration of the current legislation. For example, among others, we put a lot of time and effort to keep the legislation against money laundering from becoming an excessive and unjustified burden for NGOs. At the same time, we gathered together the necessary know-how from the members of the coalition to put together a “compliance kit” summarizing the existing requirements, that should help organizations to better understand what they have to do to be conformant with the current legislation.

Later throughout the year, an improved context allowed for a more proactive approach and we were able to facilitate discussions about improving the existing legislation – starting with the freedom of assembly law. The progress thus far is that we opened the discussion with all the political parties on a policy brief issued by the coalition. These efforts will continue in 2020 as well. The next step of the coalition is a positive public communication campaign to promote the role of human rights/advocacy-oriented NGOs.

In terms of **community organizing and advocacy support for citizens, citizen groups and NGOs**, we continued to work with our previous clients and to respond to new needs and requests.

A noteworthy success was achieved by the campaign around housing in the village of Malu Vânăt from Merișani (Argeș County). After one and a half years of campaigning, the Mayor and the local council allocated plots of land for people experiencing deep poverty. In addition to this specific result, remarkably relevant is the personal and collective growth of the local organization and of the group of affected citizens that we worked with throughout this campaign.

Worth mentioning is also the consistent shift of our community organizing program towards smaller communities – during 2019, 10 new community organizers from small towns were recruited and trained and joined the CeRe team. With their participation, we launched a new community organizing intervention in 10 small towns in Romania.

Learning, sharing of experience and practice opportunities was another consistent part of CeRe’s work throughout 2019. We continued our US internship program for community organizers with 7 new people benefiting from internships as well as with many alumni being supported in their community organizing projects.

A new learning project, addressing NGOs and citizen groups from Romania and other Black Sea countries as well, was focused on innovation in advocacy. The project offered an assistance package consisting of workshops with people from creative industries, planning sessions, exchange of experience workshops and small grants to implement new and innovative advocacy campaigns or boost existing ones.

Lastly, **to promote advocacy and activism as vehicles of change** we organized the 10th edition of the Public Participation Awards Gala. Once again, the Gala showed the many ways in which citizens' involvement pays off. As it was an anniversary edition, we focused on discussing the long-term impact of the initiatives awarded throughout the years, and on talking about participation as a long-term effort. The main goal was to show how things have changed over the past 10 years, from small and shy to larger and more powerful advocacy campaigns.

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 Program

Through the Advocacy Assistance and Community Organizing Program 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.



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.

While most of the citizen groups we have been working with in the past are located in Bucharest, in 2019 we managed to **expand with a new community organizing project in 10 small towns** along the Danube.

The project was developed in partnership with an environmental organization who aims at reducing the use of plastic and at better disposal of plastic waste.

10 new community organizers were recruited, trained and hired to lead community organizing processes in their communities. The new community organizers are mentored by CeRe's staff.

The community work is built around stirring up grassroots activism for a better public response towards the waste of plastic as one of the main polluters in the communities along the Danube River.

In the short term, we will focus on the development of the groups, in terms of membership, skills, relationship with the local community. Yet, in the medium and longer-term, we shall assess the likelihood of the groups to take on other issues in addition to environmental ones.



Another noteworthy success was achieved by the **campaign around housing** in the village of Malu Vânăt from Merișani (Argeș County). Here, several families severely affected by poverty were in danger of losing their improvised homes due to the landslides that affected their plots of land. Most of them have a fiscal role for the plots that they have and pay local taxes. After the floods (July 2018), we supported the Partner for You Association to run a campaign on the subject, directly involving those affected. After several months of intense campaigning, two of the most affected families were moved on safer land and given containers for temporary living. Finally, by the end of 2019, all the six families were allocated the promised plots of land and official documents were signed. Getting the right to housing is definitely the best of the results.



In the same village, we partnered with the local organization for another long-term intervention, aimed to empower the local community towards improving access to health rights and services. After a lot of community work, a grassroots group formed by Roma women in the village started to take shape. The group meets regularly, facilitated by a local community worker, to discuss health issues, share information and plan.

From our organizational development point of view, this campaign (as well as other initiatives we had) brought us closer to the idea of using community organizing and advocacy for the benefit of the most deprived. While we certainly witness an increase in participation, we do not see much activism to challenge inequity.

To respond to the context above, we've strategized for a shift of focus. While continuing our current work **we plan to use community organizing & advocacy as a means to fight inequity.**

In 2019 we continued to keep close to around 20 citizen groups in Bucharest. Throughout the year, we responded to specific requests of assistance or training and offered space for exchange of experience and planning. Moreover, given the electoral context (European elections and

Presidential elections in 2019), we facilitated discussions among members of the citizen groups and newly formed political parties and supported elections-related activities in different neighbourhoods. To prepare for the upcoming local election (summer of 2020), CeRe facilitates a small taskforce formed by citizens from different groups to prepare for a Citizens Led Candidates Forum.

ECON - European Community Organizing Network

Throughout 2019 we continued to be an active member of ECON – now a network of 24 organizations doing community organizing in Europe - supporting the organization of a big networking event for community organizers all over Europe in July 2019 in Hungary - Citizen Participation University (CPU); and building together with the Fundraising Committee the strategy for sustaining community organizing in Central and Eastern Europe.

As part of the Fundraising Committee's strategy, we participated in organizing a Donor Seminar in December 2019 in Berlin, Germany that brought together funders, NGOs, and community organizers from member organizations of ECON. Together we've explored ways in which we could amplify the impact of the existing funds and also create evaluation systems that assess the value this work creates, suited for participatory, process-oriented approaches.

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

Shaping Participatory Democracy - Community organizing internship program¹

The exchange program, "Shaping Participatory Democracy", that CeRe coordinates in Romania, continued in 2019 with new activists and organizers from under-represented fields taking part in six-week internships with US community-based organizations. Here they had the opportunity to learn about and experience community organizing tools and practices. The program also offered trainings and continued support on individual projects related to citizen participation and advocacy, civic education.

¹ CeRe is familiar with the restrictions on using Mott funds for activities taking place in the US. These costs are covered from other sources.

In the last couple of years, we've seen an increased interest in the exchange program from activists outside of Bucharest and from people that work on new issues, such as refugees. Even people that have been mobilizing in massive protests against corruption are realizing that protests can only take you so far and that you need organizing to bring about lasting change.

During 2019, seven more activists and community organizers had their internships in US. Organizations such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, Picture The Homeless, Michigan Disability Rights Coalition, Take Action Minnesota, US Together or Working Families Organization, hosted and mentored the interns, making sure they get the knowledge and practice they need to improve their work back at home.

A large part of the program is focused on the program alumni. The US mentors are regularly visiting their mentees in Romania – offering assistance, but also offering open workshops on community organizing, political organizing, advocacy, and other related issues.



The mix of internships, follow up mentorship and facilitation of partnerships between alumni led to a wide range of projects, such as the examples below:

- In the rural area of Valea Seaca, a sisterhood program has been kicked off, where young Roma women are being mentored by experienced, successful Roma women, thus getting useful advice and learning they have the power to succeed in life. In another rural area, Ineu, the Roma community has been activated and used their newfound power to make the local authorities invest in the electrical infrastructure, providing electricity for the first time to more than 30 families.

- In Baia Mare, an ex-mining city in the North of Romania, the work of one of our alumni has had a widespread impact. This city had well-known housing problems and a history of discrimination against the Roma community. The relentless organizing efforts of our alumna helped people get the City Hall to come up with a plan to provide social housing and school transportation plus afterschool programs.
- In Cluj, one of the biggest cities in Romania, LGBT activists were fighting the City Hall three years ago just to get the simple permit to have a Pride March. Thanks to the work of the local exchange program alumna and their European and US mentors, the LGBT community has much stronger ties, working together and supporting each other. They also came up with a new objective – that of opening an LGBT community centre, which would be the first one in Romania.

Innovative Approaches in Advocacy Campaigns

Another learning opportunity offered by CeRe during 2019 focused on innovative advocacy. The project was built on the need to stir-up the tactics used by NGOs in their advocacy work. Noting that many advocacy campaigns are getting stuck, we aimed at strengthening the capacity of NGOs from various Black Sea countries (Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Bulgaria, and Georgia) to invigorate their advocacy campaigns, by using bold and creative instruments and tactics.

11 NGOs from Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine benefited from a mix of support.

Based on the experience of the project, we published a booklet meant to inspire others. The booklet is available [here](#).

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

Shrinking Space Coalition

Considering the external environment, with a lot of legislative pressure and threats towards NGOs and activism, as well as with a public discourse trying to delegitimize the NGOs, during 2018 and further on in 2019, CeRe took a more prominent role in facilitating collective action of NGOs to defend the space for participation and security of the NGOs. With support from the Network of European Foundations (Civitates), CeRe, in partnership with ActiveWatch and the Association for Defense of Human Rights in Romania, gathered together a very diverse group of 20 NGOs and activists to be part of a new coalition. The group strategized to address shrinking

space for participation through advocacy to prevent the deterioration of current legislation, but also to improve the existing regulations – read more about that in the next section of the report.

We have focused our efforts on two topics: the legislation regarding the available means for participation and the legislation affecting the establishment and operation of NGOs. During 2019, we focused our advocacy efforts on the following:

- Freedom of assembly regulations

Freedom of assembly is regulated in Romania by a 30 years old law. On one hand, the law does not account for the current developments – e.g. people are getting organized more spontaneous (using social media or channels). On the other hand, the law is very restrictive and leaves a lot of space for state abuse. In the last couple of years, such abuses took place several times.

Benefitting from the upcoming electoral campaign, from a weakened ruling party in Parliament and a new Government (supposedly more inclined to safeguard the civil rights), the coalition decided to use the momentum to advance the issue on the political agenda.

A policy brief was developed indicating the shortcomings of current legislation and also advancing specific recommendations for improvement. Our proposal is currently discussed with all political parties, in our attempt to create a cross-party support group to initiate a new bill to regulate freedom of assembly, with a focus on the positive role of the state to facilitate the use of the right.

- Freedom of information act and the transparency law

The two laws that govern this area, can be improved, but they are reasonable enough as they are. Even if we did not make them a priority we had to respond when the Government attempted to modify the implementation norms, in a way that could hinder the right to access public information and to participate in the decision-making processes. The Government considered almost all of our requests, yet the final form of the implementation norms haven't been made public or approved yet.

- Anti-money laundering legislation

Following up on the European Directive to Prevent Money Laundering, the Romanian Government and Parliament had to develop new legislation. That was a good pretext for some members of Parliament to include regulations that would have heavily affected the NGOs by burdening them with unjust administrative requirements (which were outside the scope of preventing money laundering). Together with fellow NGOs, our coalition put a lot of time and effort to convince the members of Parliament to minimize the burden on non-governmental organizations. Fortunately, we succeeded to prevent most of the provisions that would have hindered the NGOs. Yet, some new requirements were added to the legislation regulating the establishment and operation of NGOs.

- Legislation regulating the establishment and operation of NGOs.

In addition to the above, another alteration of the legislation governing the functioning of NGOs was intended by a well-known anti-NGO member of Parliament. This new bill was intended to bring about new reasons for the dissolution of non-governmental organizations. Fortunately, we were able to convince quite quickly the members of Parliament to reject the bill.

Watch-dog and advocacy for better public participation in the decision-making process²

Open Up City Hall!

During 2019 CeRe, together with fellow NGOs, has continued its watch-dog activities regarding the lack of transparency at the Bucharest level. Together with partner NGOs, we monitored all the council meetings, encouraging other activists and NGOs to do the same.



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



The third year of the local administration's mandate in Bucharest (June 2018 – July 2019) was analysed in a report released by CeRe and two other partner NGOs during the summer of 2019. Launched in a non-formal manner in front of City Hall, with a good crowd of activists around, the report got good media coverage and brought the topic on the agenda. The report focused on transparency and rule of law, but also on two major issues relevant to the citizens of Bucharest – the implementation of the Local Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Increase Social Inclusion and the implementation of the Urban Mobility Plan.

In addition to releasing the report, throughout the year we continued to push for citizens' right to address the Council. We worked to create more public interest by publicizing topics from the local council agenda directly to relevant NGOs and citizen groups. By encouraging and supporting NGOs and groups to submit recommendations and to request to have their opinions heard by the council, we are also showing that citizens and NGOs want to have their voice heard because they have relevant and on-topic suggestions. As a result, different groups and organizations came forward with their opinions on various topics: social services for women that are victims of domestic violence, taxation of cars driving in Bucharest, air pollution, the refurbishing of a well-known park in Bucharest.

Another result came from the Court, in a trial initiated in 2017. At that time, we argued that the practice restricting the citizen's right to speak in front of the Council (included in the Internal Regulation of the City Council) was illegal. After an almost two years-long trial, the Court decided to cancel the article in question, restoring the citizens' right to take the floor during the Council's public meetings. The City Council hasn't yet implemented the decision of the Court – which became our new advocacy aim.

National level

In addition to Bucharest specific results, we were happy to see that, throughout the years, our methodology was adapted and used by NGOs in other communities in Romania. The latest one is a small organization based in a village who decided to monitor the Local Council and advocate for transparency at their level, asking us to assist their endeavour.

Promoting public participation and activism



Public Participation Awards Gala

The Public Participation Awards Gala is CeRe's annual event, part of our strategy to create awareness about activism and participation in the decision-making process. The main goal of this event is to stir the enthusiasm around public participation and active citizenship among citizens, NGOs, and public authorities. The Gala is a unique event that promotes successful advocacy stories initiated by individuals, civic groups or NGOs and, at the same time, a stage for a wide range of diverse civic stories that are not commonly presented through large audience media

channels. In 10 years we awarded and promoted 121 public participation stories and collected through the competition's mechanism more than 460 successful civic examples.

On April 17th, 2019, CeRe organized the 10th edition of the Gala. More than 350 participants attended the event, while the FB LIVE broadcast had a reach of 16,000 viewers. When it comes to the award winners, this year's Gala awarded 12 initiatives – 10 stories chosen by the members of the jury (from which a special award for journalism), as well as two special awards.

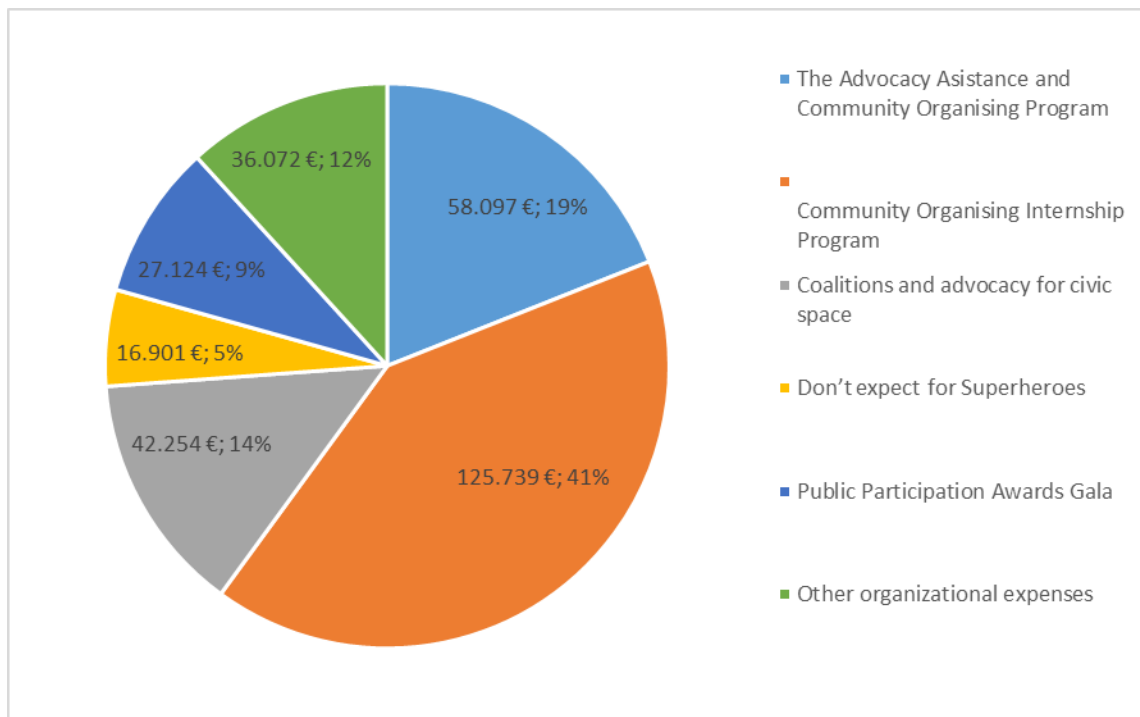
The 2019 awarded campaigns included: the boycott campaign against the referendum proposed to change the definition of marriage in the Romanian Constitution; the advocacy campaign which convinced the legislators to provide better services for people suffering from tuberculosis (taking into account the economic and social aspects that affect them); the city hall of Cluj-Napoca for the 2018 participatory budget project; etc.

The general message of the event was built around the idea of collective power that could enhance the change we want to see in the world.

[This](#) short video of the event depicts a bit of the atmosphere at the Gala.

Expenses 2019	
The Advocacy Assistance and Community Organising Program	58.097 €
Community Organising Internship Program	125.739 €
Coalitions and advocacy for civic space	42.254 €
Don't expect for Superheroes	16.901 €
Public Participation Awards Gala	27.124 €
Other organizational expenses	36.072 €
TOTAL *	306.187 €

* Conține și bugete alocate partenerilor.



Thank you!