

# TAKING ACTION, CHANGING LIVES

THE SUCCESS STORIES OF THE  
PROFESSIONAL FELLOWS OF THE GLC  
SHAPING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY PROGRAM 2019

ROMANIA



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*Bucharest, Romania, 2021*



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# 2020: A YEAR TO FORGET OR A YEAR TO REMEMBER?

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

### Country Report

by Alexandru Palas and Anda  
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Romania

"Never let a crisis go to waste"  
Saul Alinsky



In 2019, seven more fellows became alumni of the Professional Fellows Program, after getting to experience community organizing in the United States. In the year following their return, Georgiana Aldessa Lincan, Victor Cătălin Toma, Ioan Petre, Irina Vasilescu, Marius Mitrache, Vera Țurcanu-Spatari and Luca Ciubotaru continued to work for the empowerment of their communities, but now with the added challenge of the Romanian Government's erratic response to a global pandemic.

2020 was the year that showed us the power of a strong community caring for its most vulnerable in the time of a pandemic. With social inequality and discrimination increasing or becoming painfully obvious, it was beyond any doubt a fight to survive together as a community. Did we pass the test? How much worse would the situation have been without the organizers who rallied people in solidarity?

In a similar way to other countries around the world, Romania was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. On March 14th, a state of emergency was decreed and by the end of the month, with a major hospital in Suceava becoming an outbreak point, a national lockdown was implemented. Curfew was imposed, schools moved online, international and internal flights were restricted and economic activity was diminished. Measures at this stage were implemented with the help of the military and were characterized by poor communication and frequent changes, which bred confusion and discontent in the general population. The state of emergency was replaced by a state of alert, which is still in place, with local quarantines and restrictions varying with the evolution of the number of cases. But how were all these general rules applied locally and how did they increase injustice?

During the state of emergency, the regulations imposed had differing effects on privileged and marginalized communities. While public events held in wealthy communities were afforded some leeway and fines could be considered just another event cost, when it came to poor communities and individuals, rules were stricter and the same fines impacted their livelihoods. Moreover, authorities seemed more eager to impose local quarantines on marginalized Roma communities, thus cutting off the few economic ties and institutionalizing stereotypes and discrimination.

Georgiana Aldessa Lincan continued her work of developing leadership for Roma women and her organization was active in monitoring and signaling abuses committed by authorities against Roma communities during the state of emergency.

# 2020: A YEAR TO FORGET OR A YEAR TO REMEMBER?

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

Rural communities particularly suffered from a lack of information and travel restrictions in the early stages of the pandemic, and from a more difficult access to vaccines once the vaccination campaign started. Youth in these areas have been more affected by schools moving online while the necessary infrastructure was lacking and the students had less support at home, thus the educational gap between rural and urban communities has grown.

Victor Cătălin Toma worked on a community development project with youth from Sascut village, but also empowered youth from rural areas around the country to better advocate for their rights. After his group success in increasing the transparency of Rădăuți City Hall, Luca Ciubotaru followed up with a successful campaign to open a community center. He also helped coordinate a fundraising campaign to aid hospitals and vulnerable people across the County of Suceava, probably the most affected county in the initial stage of the pandemic.

Lack of access to basic social services is a serious issue that aggravated during 2020. Most authorities cut the type and frequency of social services, a duty that was left to NGOs to handle. The general lack of accessibility coupled with the isolation added by the lockdown created a challenging situation for people with disabilities.

Through his work with the blind community, Marius Mitrache helped them increase their autonomy and self-confidence in a time of great need.

Maybe the most affected social service during 2020 was access to health services. Over the general lack of supplies and sanitary conditions, patients were now confronted with whole hospital wings being set aside for Covid emergencies. Chronic patients, such as those living with HIV, were at times unable to follow their treatment plans.

Having the experience of providing social services to vulnerable or marginalized people, Ioan Petre and Irina Vasilescu provided much needed support to people living with HIV and economically disadvantaged women respectively, allowing them to advocate for better living conditions.

Lastly, 2020 was a year with local elections, ones that have been postponed from June 2020 to the fall, due to the pandemic. In general, setting the political agenda is not a very participatory process in Romania and decision-making is not transparent. The Covid crisis and political polarization provided the context for even fewer debates between the candidates – no debates between the two frontrunners were held. The general elections that took place in December 2020 proved to be an excellent opportunity for a nationalist party – AUR – to enter Parliament with close to 10% of votes.

Vera Țurcanu-Spatari helped the civic groups from Bucharest's neighborhoods to coordinate in organizing a Candidates' Forum - the only meeting that gathered several candidates in a dialogue with citizens, civic groups, and NGOs.

All of the fellows benefited from the support of their US mentors, who, during their visits shared some inspiring stories from their experience, provided learning opportunities for community members and participated in some of the fieldwork of their fellows. The Covid pandemic also affected the mentors' visits, making it impossible for Lew Finfer, Luca's mentor to visit. Despite this, he stayed in close contact with Luca through emails and calls and provided advice and support throughout Luca's campaigns.

# 2020: A YEAR TO FORGET OR A YEAR TO REMEMBER?

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

The restrictions imposed by the authorities and our own concerns for the safety of participants made us move most alumni engagement activities online. Starting in the summer of 2020, through video conferences, our alumni could meet the peers from their generation across borders, they had the opportunity to share best practices on topics such as fundraising and they got together to celebrate and share their community's culture and progress.

2020 proved to be the ultimate test for the Professional Fellows returning from the U.S. Under conditions of great and oftentimes personal stress, the alumni showed how community organizing can provide relief to communities in severe crisis, facing discrimination or lacking resources. People managed to find solutions for their problems where the authorities failed and became more vocal in holding authorities accountable. You can read more about their achievements and communities in their stories below.

# PUTTING RURAL YOUTH ON THE AGENDA



*My story is about building in Sascut village a great group of young people who are now capable to take initiative and to implement their own ideas, supporting the other young people from the local community and creating new development opportunities for them.*

## VICTOR CĂTĂLIN TOMA



### DELEGATION

SPRING 2019

### CURRENT ORGANIZATION

ACTIVE DEVELOPMENT  
ASSOCIATION

### HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION

UNITED GLOBAL OUTREACH  
ORLANDO, FL

### US MENTOR

TIMOTHY JAMES  
MCKINNEY

Firstly, Sascut village is lacking in development opportunities for young people. Most of the young people in Sascut village are part of poor families, some of them are part of Roma or Hungarian minorities. They are facing discrimination and self-confidence issues (most of them stopped dreaming about having a better life), but also the authorities' lack of interest in their problems. At the same time, they are lacking soft skills and life skills, democratic and civic knowledge, which unfortunately makes them easy to manipulate by the politicians. In Sascut there is no Youth Centre for young people to meet and develop and the youth policies, strategies and measures are completely missing, as authorities don't invest in youth.

I was aiming to empower these young people to take initiative and overcome their condition, but also to involve them in convincing public authorities to support them in the long term through efficient policies, as part of going through the community organizing cycle for a second time with the young people from Sascut village.

Thus, the main goal of my campaign was to increase the development opportunities (including at the policy level and in the long term) for the young people from Sascut village (Bacau County, Romania) by building a sustainable partnership between the young people, youth workers, public authorities and other local, national and international stakeholders.

During my fellowship at United Global Outreach in Orlando, FL, I had many opportunities to present my country and culture, but also important aspects about my work back home. I attended different meetings with different local and regional stakeholders and partners of UGO (my hosting organization), I presented what I am doing back home, the issues and problems the communities I am working with are facing, similarities and differences between the local communities in the U.S. and the ones from my own country, but most important how I contribute to solve the vulnerable communities' issues as part of my work and intervention plan.





In total I had more than 25 meetings, including informal & formal meetings with different officials (Orange County's mayor, Orlando's mayor, different county and local commissioners etc.), representatives of different organizations (Boys and Girls of Central Florida, Ideas for Us, Second Harvest etc.), different governmental and nongovernmental service providers (e.g. community centers), informal and formal dinners (with different officials, host families, community dinners etc.), organized by us (the fellows) or by others (and we were invited). We have also participated in different advisory meetings (UGO's Advisory meeting, Advent Health Florida Advisory meeting etc.) and in a training course organized by the POLIS institute about best practices in community engagement.

Last, but not least, I introduced my country and culture to the Orange County Academy's students (more than 50 kids aged from 4 to 18 years old) through workshops and activities, but also to the hosting organization and to my host family.

Regarding the action plan and how things worked after my return from the U.S., I do believe that I managed to achieve everything that I aimed to. After the fellowship, I organized, together with the local youth group from Sascut and Active Development Association (my organization), a host of events, workshops, consultations with the young people and other activities, which impacted directly more than 2000 people. I have facilitated meetings between all the local stakeholders to identify all the problems affecting the local youth and to design a long-term intervention plan. I also designed and delivered training sessions and workshops to develop key competences among the youth, but also one training for the local youth workers about how to build partnerships.

The entire program helped me tremendously to become a better community organizer and after my return from the U.S., I had the opportunity to use all the new skills with the local communities I am working with. The U.S. mentor's visit provided a great context for me to strengthen the relationships at the local and country levels with different stakeholders in the youth field, but also a great opportunity to exchange best practices at the international level, to learn from a different approach and share my work with other vulnerable communities. At the same time, my mentor's visit and his interaction with the local authorities provided extra support for the group of young people from Sascut, as part of the lobby and advocacy campaign they were running for the development of the local youth strategy.

In conclusion, I helped build in Sascut a great group of young people who are now capable to take initiative and to implement their own ideas, supporting the other young people from the local community and creating new development opportunities for them. In the long-term, investing in youth and contributing to their strategic development (including at the policy level) will help the entire community to grow and develop, becoming a best practice story for all villages or small communities facing similar issues.

LOCATION OF THE  
PROJECT  
SASCUT VILLAGE AND  
BACĂU COUNTY,  
ROMANIA

30

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

2000

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT

# PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV ARE CHANGING THE NARRATIVE



*The project I continued to work on after returning from the U.S. aimed to change the narrative in the socio-medical care system surrounding people belonging to marginalized and vulnerable groups (people living with HIV/AIDS, injecting drug users, sex workers, homeless, LGBTQ, Roma). It is the story of how a support group evolved into a group of more confident citizens, willing and able to fight for their rights.*

## IOAN PETRE



DELEGATION

SPRING 2019

CURRENT ORGANIZATION

CARUSEL

HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION

VOCAL NEW YORK  
NEW YORK CITY, NY

US MENTOR

JASON LAMAR WALKER

Since 1985, 20,146 cases of HIV/AIDS have been diagnosed in Romania. 65% of them were children younger than 14 at the time of the diagnosis, constituting the Romanian cohort exposed to hospital-acquired infections and horizontal HIV transmission. The official statistics show that during Romania's communist rule more than 10,000 children were infected with HIV. What happened is described as an epidemiological accident.

In the last 30 years, people living with HIV (PLHIV) had to ask for help, rights, access to health care and treatment, social benefits and more only through the voices of their parents – in the beginning of the epidemic – or later, through the non-profit organizations built by their parents and relatives with the support of active U.S. organizations.

Basically, in Romania, PLHIV never had their own voice present and heard due to the high stigma and discrimination they faced.

Now, based on the recent achievements in HIV treatment, to give just one example, U=U: Undetectable = Untransmittable. This is the right time for PLHIV communities to stand up and proudly change the narrative around them, especially in the context of health care.

Based on my experience in community organizing gained during my fellowship in the U.S. and with my mentor's support, we started a long-term project to change the narrative of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) by involving all relevant stakeholders in this project. The main goal is to shift the perspective of the community of PLWHA from the one of a victim/spectator towards that of an advocate for their rights and also a participant in the decision-making process.





## LOCATION OF THE PROJECT BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

After returning from the U.S., I continued working with the people coming to the support group that we organized in the Victor Babes Hospital. The group made quick progress getting organized and transition from just receiving social services to working to solve their own issues. They registered their first successes in improving the hospitalization conditions to better suit their needs. They managed to convince the administration to install TV monitors in the hospital wards through a campaign involving petitions and letters writing.

My mentor's visit contributed greatly to building confidence in community members by sharing his experience of working with low-income people directly impacted by HIV/AIDS and homelessness. During his visit in Bucharest, Jason participated in a series of important meetings with: the community of people living with or affected by HIV, other significant NGO's, health care professionals, social workers and students who will soon work in the field of social work.

He also followed closely Carusel's team in their fieldwork, thus getting a better understanding of their harm reduction approach. Jason's experience proved useful for MozaiQ, an LGBT community organization that hosted a workshop on the topic of HIV policies and community organizing facilitated by Jason.

As part of my project, I strived to change the way medical professionals perceive, see and interact with people living with HIV. In order to achieve that, I participated in several healthcare workshops and a masterclass course, where I had the opportunity to directly interact with healthcare professionals and offer them a more humanistic perspective, in which the needs and voices of PLHIV are taken into more careful consideration.

The patients coming to our regular support group reported a steady improvement in hospitalization conditions and celebrated their concrete victories.

# 20

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

# 200

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT



# FROM PROVIDING PRODUCTS TO PROVIDING POWER: ENDING PERIOD POVERTY



*Upon returning from the U.S., my focus has been on empowering girls and women from disadvantaged communities to start working towards solving some of their local issues.*

**IRINA VASILESCU**



**DELEGATION**

**SPRING 2019**

**CURRENT ORGANIZATION**

**ASOCIAȚIA PE STOP**

**HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION**

**GRANITE STATE ORGANIZING PROJECT  
MANCHESTER, NH**

**US MENTOR**

**ARON DIBACCO**

Pe Stop was founded in 2018 with the purpose of fighting period poverty in Romania, an aspect which had not been approached here before in an organized manner. In Romania, over one million girls and women of reproductive age struggle with period poverty, that is, they do not have proper access to either the products or the information they need in order to manage their periods safely and with dignity.

When I first started Pe Stop it was essentially a service-providing project. First, I conducted a survey to find out how many products the average woman uses monthly, then based on the answers I built the first packages. Every month, a group of volunteers would use money received as donations to buy products and make menstrual hygiene packages containing menstrual pads, underwear, hand disinfecting gel, intimate wipes and so on. Field teams would go out and distribute these hygiene packages to disadvantaged girls and women throughout Bucharest – whether they were homeless and sleeping in sewers, squatting in abandoned houses, living in makeshift homes in deserted areas or in ghettos.

We came across hundreds of different faces of poverty. We started in January 2018 by distributing 9 packages and by the end of 2019 we were distributing 350 packages on a monthly basis.

It is worth noting that at the time Pe Stop was the first and only project in Romania focusing in a structured manner on period poverty. Several others have followed since.

Just a few weeks into the project, we realized that period poverty was only a small part of the more complex issue of poverty in Romania in general. While our monthly distribution of packages was a great way to offer temporary assistance and start conversations with people, we needed to employ more complex measures if we wanted to have a lasting impact.





LOCATION OF THE  
PROJECT  
BUCHAREST AND  
RURAL AREAS IN  
ROMANIA

30

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

The aim of Pe Stop became to fight period poverty in Romania on all levels and work towards this goal: within 10 years, all disadvantaged girls and women have access to the products and information they need to manage their periods safely and with dignity.

I came to the Granite State Organizing Project (GSOP) in Spring 2019 with this question in mind – how can we support the people we are working with so they can find more structural and permanent solutions to their numerous problems? Since GSOP was doing just that – organizing people so they could find their power and ask authorities for better living conditions – it was a perfect pairing.

Upon returning from the U.S., I devised a plan to start approaching period poverty and poverty in general more methodically. We kept on distributing monthly period care packages, but we also started to organize menstrual hygiene classes. We would create safe spaces where the participants would feel comfortable asking questions about their bodies that they didn't dare ask anyone else, since menstruation can be quite the taboo in disadvantaged communities. Our classes use games and informal conversations to teach basic concepts about the female body and how to care for it, so even people who cannot read or write can easily attend and understand them. Providing, aside from the products, the information people need in order to safely manage their periods was the first step towards sustainability.

At the same time, we started community organizing in one of the ghettos in Bucharest. They had a big issue with the basement of one of the apartment blocks being flooded, eating away at the foundation and attracting pests. The biggest challenge was translating the things I had learned in the U.S. to Romanian culture. After a few unsuccessful attempts, we decided to momentarily give up on that particular issue, since it was too complex for us to tackle, and focus on smaller ones. A few months later, however, one of the community leaders we had identified during the process let us know that she managed to get the help and funding they needed to solve the problem of the basement.

500

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT



LOCATION OF THE  
PROJECT  
BUCHAREST AND  
RURAL AREAS IN  
ROMANIA

30

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

We didn't give up on community organizing – by focusing on relatively smaller issues in communities, such as rat infestations and the lack of running water, we kept on practicing bringing people together and supporting them to find solutions and ask for their rights to be respected. Sometimes it can get pretty complicated since some of the people we work with do not have documentation for either themselves or the homes they live in.

In order to expand public support for disadvantaged people, we started working on two additional directions:

1. Active Bystander and Real Dialogue trainings for the public, with the aim to help people understand what is the best course of action when they witness someone being abused and try to communicate effectively even with people whose opinions are radically different than their own. Aron DiBacco's visit to Romania in February 2020 was crucial for this, because she brought GSOP's workshops and gave them to us to use whenever we need, for which we are sincerely grateful.
2. Working with lawmakers to make menstrual hygiene products more easily available to vulnerable girls and women. This is our latest direction of development, started in December 2020. My participation in GSOP's activities while in the US was instrumental to help me navigate the intricate ways of Romanian lawmaking.

Now, after over three years of activity with Pe Stop, I am surprised how much it has evolved, both horizontally (number of people impacted) and in depth, regarding the methods used to work towards our final goal – ending period poverty in Romania. This is an ongoing process and it has helped us, as well as the people we work with, develop as individuals and as a team.

We will keep fighting to reach our goal and tackling period poverty on all its aspects, offering free period care products, organizing menstrual health classes, educating the public, organizing the disadvantaged people and working with lawmakers. The most important lesson learned is that complex issues need to be addressed on as many levels as possible, if we want a chance at solving them.

500

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT



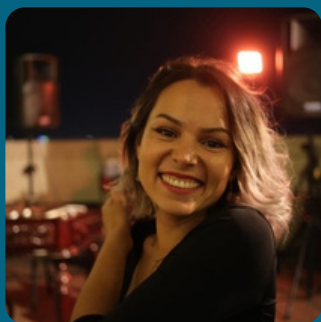
# DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP THROUGH SISTERHOOD: ROMA WOMEN



*My campaign was focused on organizing the group of young Roma women from Bucharest that I started to work with before leaving for the U.S.*

*The success of this campaign was that some of the Roma women that I worked with became part of the Sisterhood mentorship program that I am coordinating since 2018 and they became mentors and role models for young Roma girls from their communities.*

**GEORGIANA ALDESSA LINCAN**



In general, when it comes to young Roma girls living in segregated communities, the access to education and to role models is very low. We lack Roma women role models in most domains because of the complete lack of visibility of Roma women, which is happening not just in the Roma movement, but also in other fields of work. So, my campaign was about finding these Roma women coming from different educational and professional backgrounds, who could be first of all, mentors and role models for the young girls from the community and secondly, to create a group of Roma women in Bucharest who could learn more about Roma feminism, activism and leadership, to create a bigger community of Roma feminist women.

**DELEGATION**

**SPRING 2019**

**CURRENT ORGANIZATION**

**E-ROMNJA**

**HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION**

**THE CHILDREN'S AGENDA  
ROCHESTER, NY**

**US MENTOR**

**EAMONN SCANLON**

The goal of my campaign was to start and develop – through community organizing – a group of Roma women in Bucharest that could self-advocate on issues their community faces.

The entire experience of going through the Professional Fellows Program has been very important for me at the individual level because I came to realize that the work I did in my community at the grassroots level garnered a trove of knowledge and understanding of various issues for me – gains that allow me to be a resource for many other members of the community. Another good result is that through this Program, I started to see society and the work we do from a broader perspective, which provided me a more strategic view of E-Romnja's activity and of the leadership development processes inside the organization.





## LOCATION OF THE PROJECT BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

# 6

## PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

One of the challenges of this project, but also an achievement that I am proud of, was creating a safe space within our organization for Roma women to meet, explore their identity, share their issues and work collectively on imagining solutions. Unfortunately, the group did not consolidate and grow its power enough to be able to run actual campaigns. One possible reason might be the diversity of issues that Roma women face in Romanian society, which makes it difficult to decide on a common issue to work on. Another factor might be the lack of resources and time.

My U.S. mentor's visit in Romania provided opportunities for the group to learn more about power, leadership development and strategy. The workshops and meetings we organized attracted more allies and better connected us with other alumni of the Program. Eamonn's visit was also useful to promote the Professional Fellows Program to other Roma women. This exchange was not one sided though, as Eamonn got to learn and experience a bit of Roma culture while in Romania.

Although the goal of creating a powerful group of Roma women activists was not achieved, many of the Roma women who participated in the group's activities and meetings got involved in another project of our organization - Sisterhood - in which they are mentoring young Roma girls, which lowers the risk of abandoning school. By becoming role models and supporting the young girls, they also became leaders, just not in the way we first imagined.

My conclusion is that it is very good to think big, but it is also necessary to show some flexibility when working with communities. Even though I did not manage to create this powerful group of Roma women in Bucharest, I created networks of solidarity and resources which boosted our mentorship program.

# 15

## PEOPLE IMPACTED BY THE PROJECT

# CREATING A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING HUB



*My story is about the success of creating a community hub for the civil society in our city and as a resource center for the civic initiative groups from the neighboring rural communities, in Radauti, Suceava County, North-Eastern Romania.*

## LUCA CIUBOTARU



DELEGATION

FALL 2019

CURRENT ORGANIZATION

CIVIC RADAUTI, ROMANIA

HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION

MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITIES ACTION NETWORK  
BOSTON, MA

US MENTOR

LEWIS FINFER

In small communities, the principles of participatory democracy are hardly implemented by the local administration and civic engagement is impeded by many obstacles. Since 2017, the initiative group Civic Radauti made efforts to promote active citizenship and civic education in the local urban community, but also to inspire other citizens to act as well in the neighboring rural communities.

The goal of this effort was to convince the local authorities to offer the local civil society a space that would be renovated and used as a community hub, offering the citizens the opportunity to meet, discuss local issues, organize and contribute to the development of our local community.

In December 2019, after I returned from the U.S., I started discussing these issues with the local community and we planned every step of our future campaign. We evaluated the local resources, we identified a space in the city center, in a historic building that was really damaged and we started setting up the steps to be followed.

We had several community meetings to evaluate the goals, better define the problem, the objectives and the stakeholders. We drafted a concept note about the importance of the local civil society, the importance of civic participation and the impact that a community hub would have for the local community.

Together with two other local leaders, we asked for an audience with the mayor of our municipality to present to him all the arguments. Although he was reluctant at first we explained to him that the civic effort to renovate that space will create long term benefits both for the citizens and for the local administration.



LOCATION OF THE  
PROJECT  
CITY OF RĂDĂUȚI,  
SUCEAVA COUNTY,  
ROMANIA

100

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

After the mayor understood the local support such an initiative had and that it was hard to find arguments against it, he promised that he will present the proposal to the local council. We then had individual discussions with the local council members, asking them how do they support the young people and the civil society in our city and we presented our proposal to them.

In April 2020, we participated online in the local council meeting and we presented the space in the damaged building, which was right in the city center, so they agreed, unanimously, that they will allow us to use the space for free to create a community hub.

Then, we started a crowdfunding campaign and used all the tools of fundraising an NGO like ours had, so in less than 4 months, we gathered over 15.000 euros and with the help of more than 50 volunteers, we completely redesigned the space. This effort, from cleaning the space, repairing the roof, the ceiling and the floors, repairing and refurbishing the windows, the doors, repainting the decoration with the help of some local craftsmen was a tremendous effort that brought the community together.

Legal professionals, engineers, architects, businessmen, college and high school students worked together for a few months to create what we call today The Radauti Community Center. Beyond the volunteer work, this effort was a manifesto for saving the local architectural heritage and the historic buildings.

The obstacles were represented not only by the lack of financial resources, but also by the limited support of the local administration. A good communication plan, the multiple 1:1 discussion helped us gather enough resources from the community and create a space for the citizens and the community.

10.000

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT





LOCATION OF THE  
PROJECT  
CITY OF RĂDĂUȚI,  
SUCEAVA COUNTY,  
ROMANIA

100

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THE PROJECT

At the same time, our organization had a local campaign against several illegal buildings developed by real estate investors with the breach of local regulations. In this regard, we managed to stop two of them and oblige the investors to respect the law.

This effort and our campaigns won an award at the National Public Participation Award Ceremony organized by CeRe (The Resource Center for Public Participation) in 2021.

The U.S. experience and the knowledge that my U.S. mentor shared with me helped me a lot. I was able to see during my internship how important for the community organizing effort was to be sustainable, to create a space for citizens to get to know each other, to meet, discuss, exchange ideas. Even though due to the COVID pandemic, my mentor was not able to travel to Romania yet, we kept in touch online, via Zoom or Google Meet and his advice, the discussions and the ideas helped me a lot to reach the goal of our community.

In December 2020, we opened the community center with a community event and we hope that it will be a lively place, offering opportunities and a space for dialogue both for the citizens, but also for the dialogue between citizens and the local administration.

This effort was unique not only in our county, but at the level of our whole region. It is the first of its kind in our region and it will be a resource for the whole civic sector, both in urban, but also in rural areas. This effort to create a community center was a success and was a great opportunity to bring together the local community for a common goal – a more active and a better governed city.

10.000

PEOPLE IMPACTED BY  
THE PROJECT

# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN AN ELECTORAL DEBATE DESERT

FORUMUL  
CANDIDAȚILOR

Călin Popescu Tăriceanu × Ioan Sîrbu  
Cătălin Deaconescu (CGMB) × Vlad Voiculescu (CGMB)



*My story is about the success of 18 civic groups and organizations that joined for a common cause and showed their power and expertise to the candidates running for the general Bucharest City Hall office.*

VERA ȚURCANU-SPATARI



DELEGATION

FALL 2019

CURRENT ORGANIZATION

CERE: RESOURCE CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION

TAKE ACTION MINNESOTA  
MINNEAPOLIS, MN

US MENTOR

ELIANNE FARHAT

In recent years, most political parties and elected officials drafted and voted the public agenda and budgets without considering the actual needs of the citizens. In Bucharest, the institutional practices in terms of transparency and public participation in decision-making became more restrictive and opaquer, especially after the 2016 local elections. There was an ever-growing sense that the authorities don't listen to us, the citizens, but to big real estate companies instead, and they act based on personal interests.

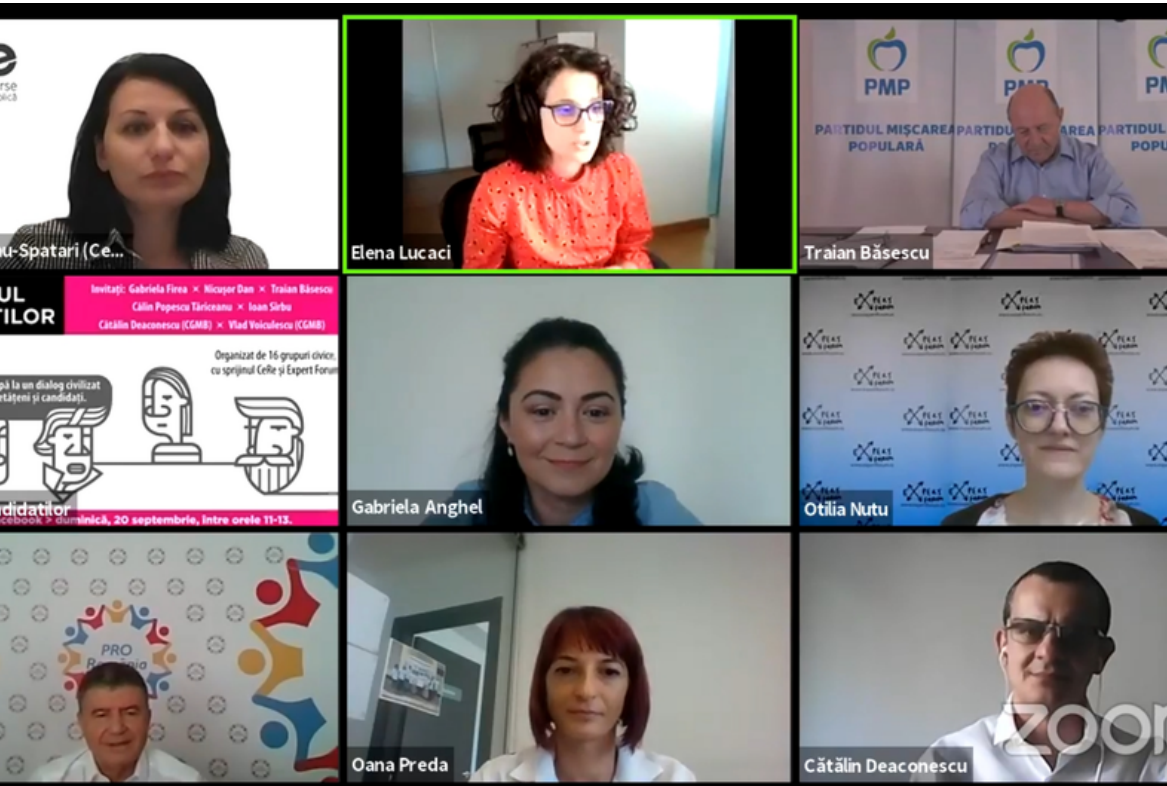
The upcoming local elections were the appropriate moment in which the citizen-run groups had to be more strategic in advocating their issues and take the reins of power.

I started doing organizing around elections in 2018 while working at CeRe. I helped convene the civic groups' leaders and the representatives of three newly formed political parties to meet and learn about each other's issues and agenda. These parties had none or very few representatives in the General and District Councils, and thus, we aimed to better understand their political offer and plans for the upcoming 2020 local elections.

During that meeting, the participants expressed their interest in gathering periodically and maintaining the dialogue, especially before the local elections. Thus, during the following years, the civic leaders invited the politicians to different neighborhood events. And the parties took an increased interest in the issues voiced by the citizen-run groups.

However, a true partnership was not established. And thus, I focused on keeping the civic groups' sight on the upcoming local electoral campaigns to advance their issues and help increase voter turnout in their neighborhoods.





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The internship in the U.S., at Take Action Minnesota, equipped me with many tools and positive examples that I ongoingly applied in my organizing work. The training organized by my mentor, Elianne Farhat while visiting Romania, increased the civic leaders' knowledge on how to communicate with politicians and host debates with the local candidates during elections. It also brought us closer to our common idea that we have to make the most of the electoral campaign to pursue our issues.

The local election in Romania was initially planned for June 2020. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic led the Government to postpone the election date until September 27th, 2020. The delay allowed me to launch a more extensive organizing process and address all the active civic groups and several NGOs from Bucharest to organize a Candidate Forum.

Despite the general mistrust in the authorities and the low morale caused by the pandemic, 16 civic groups responded affirmatively to our call and engaged in the planning process of the Candidate Forum. At the same time, I contacted the Expert Forum Organization and invited them to partner with us in organizing the Forum. The organization had experience organizing online meetings with politicians; therefore, I suggested to the civic groups to strengthen our team with a partner with relevant skills.

The event's purpose was to engage the five top-ranked candidates for the Bucharest General City Hall Mayor's and Vice-mayor's offices to respond to citizens' questions and learn what their proposed solutions are. The intention to invite the vice-mayoral candidates was to ensure a backup if the candidate for the Mayor's office would not attend the forum due to a possible schedule conflict.

We started our work by forming a smaller committee and setting an action plan calendar. Due to the constraints related to in-person meetings during the pandemic, we decided to host the Candidate Forum online.



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The Forum's structure took the form of a question-and-answer session and covered a broad range of issues prepared beforehand by the leaders of the civic groups based on their advocacy work. The candidates did not receive the questions before the event.

Not all the invitees, including the leading two candidates, who didn't engage in any debate during the campaign, accepted to participate in the Candidate Forum. Nevertheless, we hosted the event live on Facebook a week before the election day and announced during the event the reasons why some candidates were not present.

It is worth mentioning that the Candidate Forum was the only meeting that gathered several candidates in a dialogue with citizens, civic groups, and NGOs. No such kind of event was organized in Bucharest during the 2020 local elections' campaign, in which more than two candidates would be present to answer directly to the citizen's questions.

The Candidate Forum was a great tool to provide the Bucharest neighborhood civic groups, NGOs, and voters, with an opportunity to learn about and compare the candidates' positions on public issues in a neutral, non-partisan setting.

After a long silent and less active period, the civic leaders from Bucharest re-established and reframed the relationships between them in order to stand as a united voice in front of the politicians.

The local civic groups from two of Bucharest's districts formed local coalitions and jointly advocated for their districts' issues.

We understood and learned that we have to be more present politically and continuously challenge the power asymmetries in order to achieve a positive change – a true democracy. Regardless of who is in office, we have to keep our energy high and seek allies and friends who can support our causes and increase our winning chances.

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# ACCESSING AUTONOMY FOR THE BLIND



*I organized a drama class for the blind, which successfully helped the attendants to improve the way they express themselves, confidently, both verbally and by learning to use body and facial expressions. I also organized city walking tours with young blind persons to boost their confidence in using a walking cane and moving independently.*

## MARIUS-CĂTĂLIN MITRACHE



### DELEGATION

FALL 2019

### CURRENT ORGANIZATION

TANDEM ASSOCIATION

### HOSTING U.S. ORGANIZATION

BOSTON CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING  
BOSTON, MA

### US MENTOR

BILL HENNING

Two of the greatest challenges that blind people face is learning to be autonomous and come out of their shell. They tend to be timid in society and lack skills that would enable the sighted people to better understand and even listen to them. Examples include “looking” at the person the blind is talking to, using facial expressions and body language.

Usually, blind people do not move their head/eyes towards the person talking to them, thus giving the impression that they are not listening. I have many times introduced blind persons to some of my sighted friends and later asked for feedback from both sides. While visually impaired people claimed to feel uncomfortable and isolated in the presence of the sighted, not being able to understand what was happening in their surroundings, the latter said that the blind came across as absent, immobile and not engaging in the conversation.

The blind people community is struggling to come out of a profound isolation – which deepened even more during the pandemic – and fight against marginalization and lack of opportunities. In the past few years, many trusts and companies have financed programs to enable the blind to be more active and autonomous. Some programs tried to empower them to claim their rights and be as active as possible in the society. Yet, in order to make themselves heard and understood, it is essential to develop communication skills and to learn to also be physically expressive.

In 2018, I attended drama classes organized by a local NGO called Tandem, which helped me realize how much blind people could benefit from practicing this type of training. As this program unfortunately ended rather soon, I decided to organize drama classes myself, after returning from the Professional Fellows Program. Therefore, in December 2019 I got in touch with a drama teacher, I invited my blind contacts to the sessions and secured each week a place where we could meet, a few times even at CeRe’s headquarters.





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This is an ongoing program, even though we had to move it online during lockdown. At present, we meet once a week and, when the weather allows it, we even take our classes in the park.

Our aim has been to give blind people a reason to go out and enjoy themselves in a warm and safe environment, while also learning important skills for their development, when it comes to communicating and expressing themselves.

When my mentor, Bill, visited Romania, I organized an advocacy workshop where he taught us techniques to better communicate and obtain results when interacting with state authorities. Also, we learned the importance of the manner in which one tells one's own story. In Boston, during the fellowship, I learned how important it is for people with disabilities to have a united and well-organized community that can make itself heard and can take part in drafting laws that concern them. All this made me realize that one of the main problems of our community in Romania is the lack of communication skills.

While finding a drama teacher willing to work with blind persons did not pose any problem, it initially proved rather difficult to attract students for this class. Fortunately, the number of participants grew steadily, but the beginning of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown brought significant changes. We had to move the sessions online, meaning we could no longer work on body language, movement and touch. Also, the greater the number of online participants, the greater the misunderstandings caused by technical issues (delay, echo etc.).

The solution was to organize more classes for smaller groups and to find a new drama teacher, willing to work exclusively with sound. Over time, some participants decided to quit and only returned once the face-to-face lessons resumed.

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The drama classes kept people together and busy during the long months of lockdown and overall improved their communication skills and confidence. At present, we meet face-to-face again and are planning to record short audio plays within a year from now and hopefully even have some public performances. Our group is more united and feels more prepared to express their needs. I believe I managed, through these classes, to form an active group that could, in the near future, organize other various activities.

In the future, I plan to organize more workshops, as well as short trips with walking canes, even to other cities, without sighted guides. This is a major step in our development as independent blind persons – the ability to go wherever we want and whenever we want to is very important for our self-esteem and confidence.

The more people are active and go out to make themselves seen and heard, the more our minority group will be understood and accepted by society. The more blind people learn to “look” at their conversation partner, the more they will be listened to and taken seriously.