

Come on, it'll be over by Easter

The beginning of 2020 seems like an eternity ago. Everything before Covid seems like an eternity ago. The pandemic caught us during the recruitment period for a new set of community organizers to go to the US, in the middle of campaigning for CAS-discounted pregnancy ultrasounds, making plans for the upcoming local elections, working on changes to the Public Assembly Act, and many more.

They all involved people, collective action, meetings, events.

And the pandemic came. Some of us started out in denial: "it's just a flu" or "let's get it over with by Easter". Others were more realistic. But no one imagined from the start what was to come.

The work-from-home started. At first with putting most projects on hold - sure to be finished by Easter. We as a team also went into a bit of an "on hold" state of mind, not knowing where to start with the new situation. It seemed that everything on our agenda suddenly became absolutely irrelevant.

It was hard and with a lot of uncertainty. We didn't really know how long it would take, what could be done online and what couldn't. And more importantly, what we as an organisation can do to help get through the crisis.

First came the answer to the last question, which I found together with colleagues in the *NGOs for Citizens Group*. That's how www.stateofdemocracy.ro was born. We started with quick reactions to government decisions that we considered undemocratic, then built the website which became a kind of real-time reporting system for the slippages.

Gradually we resumed our agenda. We adapted ongoing projects, rethought new ones. We learned to work as a remote team, each from our own couch, each with our own anxieties. Then we successfully combined working from home with coming to the office. We learned to navigate the pandemonium of online and offline.

We continued the projects we had started, but managed to start new ones in a long-planned direction: a community organizing programme in rural areas and another with homeless people.

The pandemic has forced us to take a different look at the Public Participation Awards Gala. We had long wanted to transform it, but didn't know exactly how. What we ended up with was a travelling edition, where we took the Gala stage home to each winner. And for us and for others, these were the first offline events.

2020 was over as if it wasn't. 2021 was about learning to operate in a new context. With a lot of stress, but also with new plans and projects. Read about it all in the pages that follow.

The pandemic is not over. We know for sure it won't be over by Easter. But we also know we can't just sit around and wait for it to end.

Text by Oana Preda, Executive Director CeRe: Resource Centre for Public Participation

● **NGO Coalition for Citizens**

The coalition is made up of [20 NGOs that have joined together to protect civic space](#). We are concerned about attempts to delegitimise activist NGOs and attempts to change legislation to the detriment of civil society. We promote activism as a legitimate means of bringing about change in society.

In these two years we have set ourselves 3 main directions: constant monitoring of legislation affecting civic space and speed of reaction to attempts to damage current regulations or to their inadequate implementation, an advocacy campaign to amend the Law on Public Assemblies and to better explain what activist NGOs are and what their role is.

Advocacy for better (or at least not worse) laws

The beginning of 2020 caught us commenting on the proposals to amend the implementing rules for Law 544/2001 on Free Access to Information of Public Interest, which were on the Government's table at the time. We were outraged, for example, that it was proposed that an institution could refuse to provide information of public interest on the grounds that the requester had asked for it in bad faith. Fortunately, such proposals did not go far enough.

The most important goal of the coalition was to amend the Law on Public Assemblies. The current law, adopted in 1991, is archaic and does not correspond to the social and civic realities of a democratic state. A good example of the shortcomings of this law is found in the article that allows for forceful intervention, without approval, by the authorities when they believe that there are "strong indications that participants are preparing or have committed an illegal act". After many discussions in the coalition, but also with a group of senators and deputies, in the summer of 2020 we managed to propose the text of a draft law, which was tabled for parliamentary debate. The bill [passed the Senate](#) by tacit approval in December 2020, and is now stuck on the agenda of the [Chamber of Deputies](#), where it met with much opposition. Of course, our campaign continues.

The state of democracy

Another role we have taken on is to constantly fine the state for its misdeeds. A high point was at the beginning of the pandemic when the health crisis made public institutions forget democracy. A clear abuse was when Baia Mare city hall employees, on the mayor's orders,

[forcibly picked up](#) people suspected of "appealing to public charity" [off the street](#) and took them to social centres, whether they wanted to or not. There they were forced to "rehabilitate themselves through work". Another example of abuse, encountered during the pandemic, was the [publication of the personal details](#) of those stranded at home. Because someone had to draw attention to them, we made a lot of public appeals.

This is how www.stareademocratiei.ro came into being, which became the platform for the "NGOs for Citizens" group, and then the [State of Democracy report](#) that we plan to publish annually. If you would like to be kept up to date with the public reactions of the "NGOs for Citizens" Group, please like & follow the [dedicated FB page](#).



Starea democrației

Who is an NGO activist and what are they good for

Because activists and NGOs have been stamped with all sorts of labels - from foreign agents to sex-marxists to paid protesters, we tried to deconstruct a number of myths, together with some well-known illustrators and artists: a series of [funny illustrations](#) and simple messages show what activist NGOs are and what they are good for.

In more detail, we showed what citizen activism can achieve with a [video report](#) on two civic initiative groups made in collaboration with Recorder.

And for those who want to try their hand at civic activism, we've published [our Guide to Civic Survival](#). It provides civic "tools" that can be used by any citizen who wants to solve a problem in their community by empowering the relevant authorities.

- **Community Organising and Advocacy Assistance**

In 2020 and 2021 we have combined our established approaches with a new vision: to put community organisation at the service of vulnerable groups.

We stayed in touch with the Citizens' Groups in Bucharest, continued to work with other

older partners, started a new project of structured advocacy support where we help 12 groups and organisations in their own advocacy campaigns, finished the support programme for groups and organisations in the cities along the Danube.

In the new, more socially oriented direction, we have opened two new community organizing tracks. One is [Homeless Citizens' Voice](#) - a project with the [Carousel Association](#), where we try to bring homelessness issues to the agenda, but also support their direct involvement in advocacy activities. The second pathway is **community organising in rural communities affected by lack of resources**. Read below about the experience of the first 3 villages we entered.

The voice of the homeless

In the spring of 2021 we had the opportunity to start a project we had been thinking about for a long time, being aware of the insufficiency and inadequacy of the social services that local authorities manage to provide to homeless people in Bucharest. At the same time, we were aware that applying our advocacy and community organizing experience with this new segment of citizens would present a number of new challenges and learning opportunities. In this respect, the collaboration with [Carousel Association](#) proved essential, as our partners have a long experience in providing services that are appreciated by many homeless people.



We started by assessing the current situation. To do this, we documented the services and forms of support that homeless people should be entitled to under the law, and we questioned the general and sectoral town halls through public enquiries and hearings about the services they offer and the number of beneficiaries. In parallel, we started building relationships with homeless people through individual and group discussions about their daily problems, but also about solutions that could meet their needs and how they perceive the services they currently receive.

Our documentation efforts resulted in the report [A diagnostic of the services offered by the municipality to homeless people](#), which inventories the problems related to shelter

conditions, health services, obtaining identity documents and accessing the benefits stipulated by law. The report also includes a section that gives a direct account of how homeless people perceive their situation and their lack of confidence in the interest in the problems they face:

"That's the most important thing, to have a home. The rest don't seem so important to me. To have a place to stay, to rest properly. (...) You have to rest. There should be more of these centres. To have somewhere to sleep, to go to work in the morning. (...) But that's just talk. If nothing has been done for 30 years..."



The report was launched [at a conference attended by representatives of town halls, social welfare directorates, the police and relevant NGOs](#). The report was used as an advocacy tool in discussions with local authorities. The issues we prioritised were providing a solution for the [vaccination of people without IDs](#), caught between the impossibility to get vaccinated without ID and the restriction to enter public institutions without a vaccination certificate, and providing additional space in shelters during winter so that homeless people can survive the winter without becoming a public health risk due to the indifference of the authorities.

The project will continue throughout 2022, seeking to improve self-representation and living conditions for homeless people.

Community organisation in rural areas

Through a team of community organizers we started working in 3 villages: Ciobotea (Argeş), Izvoru (Giurgiu) and Latinu (Brăila). Our intervention in the community organising process started by knocking from door to door, to identify what urgent needs the communities are facing and who is willing to get involved in initiatives to get the public authorities to solve them. It has not been easy to bring people together in civic action because in rural areas the lack of trust in local government and in general in the possible outcomes of civic engagement is very low compared to the dynamics of large urban communities. However, in two of the villages we found citizens willing to get involved to solve problems that could not be delayed. We were with people in writing petitions, collecting signatures and making advocacy plans that targeted local public authorities. All these efforts have resulted in important victories for villagers.



Ciobotea (Jud Argeş)



Izvoru (Giurgiu)



Latinu (Brăila)

Waste bins have been installed in Izvoru and the water pressure in Ciobotea has been improved. Young people got involved in the campaign asking the local administration to extend the route for public transport to their village. The Ciobotea youths' initiative to [send postcards with pictures and personalised messages to local councillors](#) is an excellent model of public pressure and has resulted in a promise from the town hall to solve the problem.

More important than the immediate impact of the civic initiatives, we believe, are the civic skills of the more than 60 people in these 3 villages who have remained actively involved in the administration-oriented initiatives and a greater confidence in the power of community involvement in similar initiatives.

Civic steps towards a strong community

The year 2021 can be described as a time when civic engagement and advocacy are difficult endeavours even for experienced organisations. Reduced contact hours with authorities, online hearings (i.e. sometimes still letters) have led to delays and discouraged many people's initiatives. Basically, it took a lot of effort to see results in our work with civic groups.

In the [Civic Steps to a Strong Community](#) program, we worked with a wide variety of civic organizations and groups, from groups of a few people to organizations with branches in all major cities. Larger organisations with momentum for change are being held back by a narrowing of public agenda items and the political confusion that the parties have been in (especially in the second half of the year). On the other hand, small groups are overwhelmed by fears, scarce resources, and the declining interest of people in communities in what is happening in the public space (compounded by social distancing).

However, good things have happened in the project, for which people got involved and which brought them success and joy - the first Pride march in Iasi organized by [Rise OUT](#) with the support of our partners [CIVICA](#) and us, a moment of success despite the Mayor's pressure, the [APTA](#) group (also with CIVICA support) was invited to participate in the Traffic Commission meetings and made several successful advocacy efforts for the accessibility of the city.



The groups directly mentored by us have had different paths, but at this point the key word that describes their need is "community". [The February 16 Neighbourhood group](#) has learned that individual pressure and petitions are just small tools and that community involvement is key. After countless requests and trips to the Mayor, Vice-Mayor, PDA, Police and others, the group is turning to working in the community and finding creative solutions for civic engagement. In December, the group obtained through communication with local councillors (the only ones who responded) participation in a local council meeting. After some unsatisfactory promises from Mayor Clotilde Armand, the group kept in touch with councillors and participated with proposals for the budget and investment list communicated for 2022.

[For green spaces and playgrounds in Grozăvești](#) is a group that remained for a few months with only one member, but now it's involving more than 20 people in transparency and advocacy actions and it has asked the local University (Polytechnic University Bucharest) to include a playground in a DUP (detailed urbanistic plan) for the campus space and have written to local Councillors Sector 6 to ask for their support. The group also participated physically and with proposals in the Sector 6 budget debate meeting and had several discussions with the Vice Mayor and local councillors to identify suitable spaces in the neighbourhood.



For green spaces and playgrounds in Grozăvești at the debate for local budget



Online community action. Children asking for a playground

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Locuri.De.Joaca.Si.Spatii.Verzi.In.Grozavesti>

And [the Bartolomeu Avantgarden Community Association](#), which had been working on many initiatives to signal problems in the public space after winning a lawsuit against a factory and communicating constantly with the community, is starting to receive spontaneous signs and help from people who want to join their cause and offer help in getting a (long desired) post office in their area. The group now has several initiatives, including a campaign for parking in their neighborhood. They have also contributed 3 projects to participatory budgeting and are preparing for more initiatives this spring to help connect and build community solidarity around issues.

In order for mentored groups and organizations to achieve results in their advocacy

campaigns, we have been there to help them build or grow their teams, collaborate and motivate each other in cold and difficult Zoom meetings, to find solutions and make decisions, and to engage in coordination and creative efforts almost only from behind the screen.



Figure 1. Community meeting. February 16 Neighbourhood

With clean waters



Together with the “[Mai mult Verde](#)”/More green Association we are contributing to stop plastic pollution in 10 cities along the Danube. For over two years we have been involved in training community organisers in these towns and increasing the involvement of local communities in civic actions to protect the environment.

In 10 Danube towns, civic groups have been formed that have already experienced a community organising process and have succeeded in making important steps towards making local authorities more responsive to solving community problems. More than 500 people participated in the community events organised by the civic groups on the occasion of Danube Day and in the various sanitation campaigns organised together with colleagues from our project partners “Mai Mult Verde” Association.

8 civic groups have managed to attract citizens eager to get involved in their actions. The installation of waste bins and information boards, as well as the setting up of spaces for the groups' activities, are some of the successful civic initiatives.



Approaches to public authorities are in most cases time, energy and resource consuming.

This is what the involvement of the 10 groups over two years looks like in a few figures:

- over 80 petitions and requests submitted
- 107 direct meetings with decision-makers
- participation in 10 hearings
- at least 160 citizens in the 10 cities know what to do when they have a problem in their community (how to write a petition, prepare for a hearing or organize a protest)

Support for groups in Bucharest

In 2021 we had discussions with the civic groups Favorit Initiative, Tei Lake Civic Initiative Group and Cișmigiu Civic Initiative Group to understand their needs and to help them with what they specifically need.

We found that their strongest need is to connect with others, both people in their neighborhood and other civic groups. A problem noticed by many, and which the leaders of these civic groups also feel, is the deterioration of their relationship with the public space, with their neighbourhood, with everything outside their own household and basic needs. Beyond this issue, the civic group Favorit Initiative needed to be listened to and supported with communication actions in the project related to the creation of the Cultural Center, for which they have been constantly involved for more than 10 years.



Favorit, Bucharest.

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/initiativafavorit>

Due to the freezing of construction projects as a result of rising prices and the lack of a legal framework allowing the Mayors to proceed with construction at prices different from those originally agreed, the construction of the Favorit Cultural Centre has been halted and the group is skeptical about its continuation. We have tried through discussions with members of the group to help them have as objective a way of relating to this unfortunate event as possible, despite strong emotions and feelings of disappointment.

- **Don't Wait for Superheroes**

As well as supporting citizens' groups in their attempts to make their voices heard, we also strive to increase the attention and involvement of authorities in community-based approaches.

For years now, together with [ActiveWatch](#), we have been standing on the head of the Bucharest City Hall and the General Council as a kind of transparency monitor. We follow the Council meetings, we follow the extent to which Law 52/2003 and, in general, the rules of good practice regarding the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process are respected.

In 2020 we had a second victory in court: the court decided to annul a General Council Decision on the grounds that it was adopted without following the public debate procedure indicated by Law 52/2003 on transparency in public administration.

We did not let Mayor Firea's mandate end without a [report](#) that evaluates the transparency of the institution, but also the concern for the social and urban mobility areas.

Before the elections, we worked together with 16 citizens' groups in Bucharest and with Expert Forum and organised a [candidates' forum](#) in which some of those who were asking for our votes participated. The agenda of the discussion was set by the civic groups and included topics of interest to citizens: protection of the built heritage, protection of parks and green spaces, transparency of public institutions, urban mobility and infrastructure, social protection, access and participation of citizens in public decision-making.

Also together with ActiveWatch and OPTAR, we welcomed the new administrative leadership of the city with a [list of recommendations](#) in the areas of: transparency of administration, inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process, urban mobility and the social field. All our recommendations were based on monitoring the work of the Bucharest local authority in previous mandates.

Of course, we continued to follow the work of the new leadership of the Capital and, after 6 months in office, we came up with a series of conclusions contained in a new [report](#): 6 months and a city. At the time, we showed that the rate of public debate on regulatory projects was unacceptably low. But we also see improvements in the process of applying the minimum legal rules for public participation: such as the possibility to speak at General Council meetings.

Unfortunately, the level of inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process has decreased even more by the end of the first year in office: only 3.29% of the draft laws were subject to public debate, through publication on the PMB website at least 30 days before the vote of the General Council. This is one of the conclusions of [Many calculations, few results](#) - the report in which CeRe and ActiveWatch analyse the work of Mayor Nicușor Dan and the General Council's first year in office. We have also identified some positive things in terms of transparency: for example, citizens can follow the meetings of the specialised committees on the internet. The overall conclusion of the report is unfortunately a pessimistic one: one year into the mandate we have yet to see any major projects started or, at least, small visible changes that would make life in the city a little better.

- **The fellowship and community organizing in the USA**

CeRe's international collaborations with partners in Spain, Poland, Slovakia, Serbia, Hungary, Albania, Bulgaria and the USA were inevitably affected by the travel restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic. Training programmes that required physical presence were postponed, prolonging projects, and project team meetings moved online or became endless email chains.

[The Professional Fellows program](#), which CeRe has been running since 2012 with partners in the US, [GLCAP](#), and 4 other European countries, involves people who want to learn how to make the changes needed in their communities in an exchange with organizations in the United States. The pandemic has made it impossible for some of the 2019 generation of American mentors to travel to our country, as well as for the Romanians selected for the 2020 internship to participate.

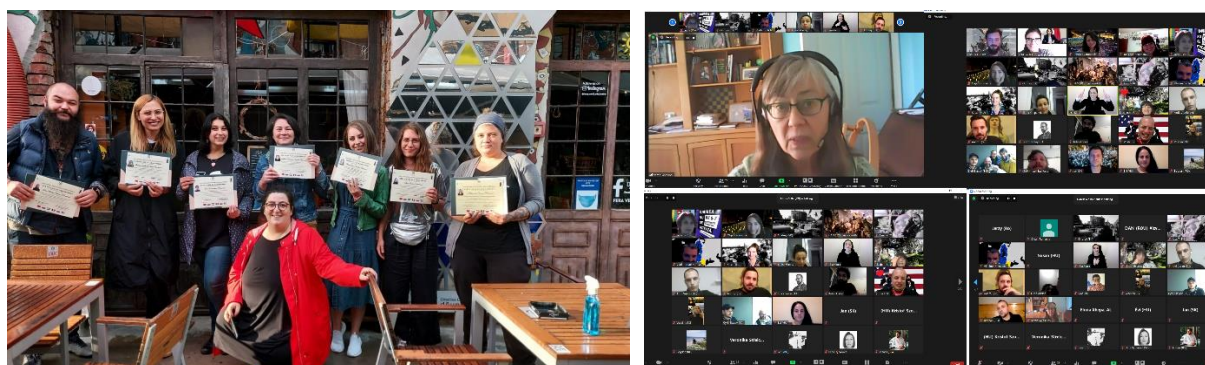


Figure 2. Professional Fellows (online and offline)

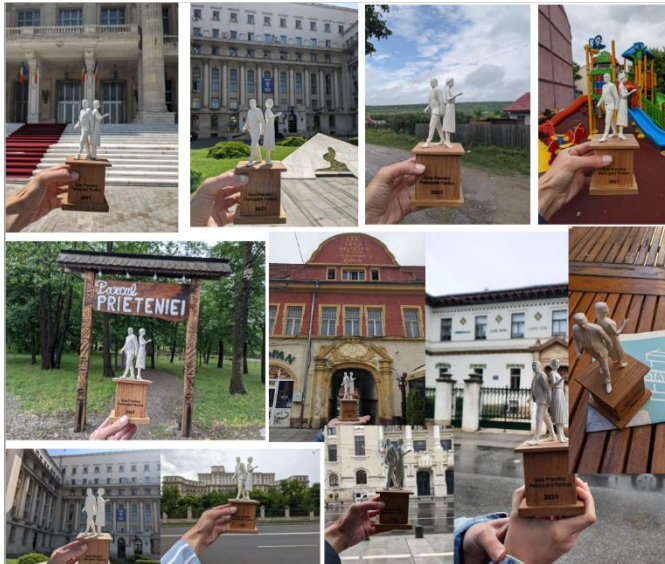
In response to the uncertainty of trainees leaving in 2020, the programme has been reshaped from the ground up, while retaining the possibility of gaining fieldwork experience in the future. Thus, we have dropped mandatory fieldwork for interns, learned to facilitate online training sessions in which we have co-opted American community organizers to replace the training normally received face-to-face in Romania and the States, and developed an online meeting schedule for the program's international alumni network.

The results of the adaptation work have been the survival of the programme and its continuation with a new round in 2022, a generation of trainees who will leave for the US fully prepared in terms of their understanding of community organising, and renewed international links between activists working in similar fields.

Testimonial given by Ioana Jerzy Dumitrescu, Professional Fellows 2020, after completing the online training module:

"The Professional Fellows program has been the most intense learning experience of my life as a young activist. In the long year since being accepted into the program, I have gained valuable insight into the principles of community organizing, plus different tools and tactics that will help me make my community stronger, fight for social change, and become a better leader."

● Public Participation Awards Gala, 12th edition



The year 2021 also brought many changes to the format of the Public Participation Awards Gala. We have been driven since before the pandemic by the desire to refresh the format of the Gala, and the restrictions of the health crisis have pushed us to find financial and creative resources to put our ideas into practice. The Gala stage, which in previous years brought together the stories and people of the Gala, has moved to the community of each award winner. In 2021, we're holding

the awards events in communities where brave and courageous civic-minded people have made change happen. At each of the 11 local award events, we had the opportunity to get to know the communities more closely, to better understand the dynamics of the award-winning civic efforts, and to connect with people in government or journalists interested in the topics of the award-winning campaigns. Each offline award event was presented to the public on the [Gala FB page](#), where we posted photos and videos of the winners and various stakeholders involved in their advocacy campaigns.

At the same time, the stories and people of the Gala have found space for readers in the [Gala Newspaper](#) and on the [dedicated website](#). And because every edition we feel we have to show our utmost admiration to the brave and courageous Galas, in 2021 we have decided to "Raise a statue of civic people." And we did, [literally](#).

[We would like to thank the members of the jury and the Partners and Sponsors of the 2021 event.](#)



● Courses and workshops

Several organisations have invited us to get involved in their projects by offering courses or planning workshops for their teams or beneficiaries. Thus we offered the Semper Musica team a series of workshops that led to the development of a strategic plan for the next few years, community organizing and advocacy training for CSDF beneficiaries, advocacy training for members of the Coalition for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants in Romania or a community organizing and advocacy workshop for a group of friendly ladies from Ferentari neighborhood, part of one of the projects of the Respiro Human Rights Research Centre.

This component of our work on the one hand helps us to contribute to the mission of the organisation, on the other hand it generates income for times when we do not have funding. Thank you to the organisations that have trusted CeRe and its team.

● Fundraising for CeRe

The end of 2020 brought us the good news that made it possible to organise the Public Participation Awards Gala. With financial support from the [Civic Innovation Fund](#) and the support of individual donors from the [Brussels Donors' Circle](#) we had a good start in making the Gala plans turn into reality. We developed [a new website dedicated to the Gala](#) and had sufficient resources for the costs of organising and communicating the event. We are grateful to all of you who supported us financially, individual donors, organisations, companies and media partners. Thank you to the Romanian American Foundation, the National Agency for Community Education and Training Programmes (NACETP), the Association for Community Relations (ACR), Mai Mult Verde, DigiFM and IQads. Another round of thanks goes to all the individual donors who made the plan to award grants to the winners possible for the first time in the history of the Gala. We were not able to get enough budget for all the winners,

but we were able to offer 5 grants totalling €5000 to the campaigners who scored high in the judging process. Thank you for your support!

Expenses 2020	
The Advocacy Assistance and Community Organising Program	96,507 €
Community Organising Internship Program	39,144 €
Coalitions and advocacy for civic space	64,992 €
Don't expect for Superheroes	1,789 €
Other organizational expenses	39,294 €
TOTAL *	241,726 €

** It also contains budgets allocated to partners*

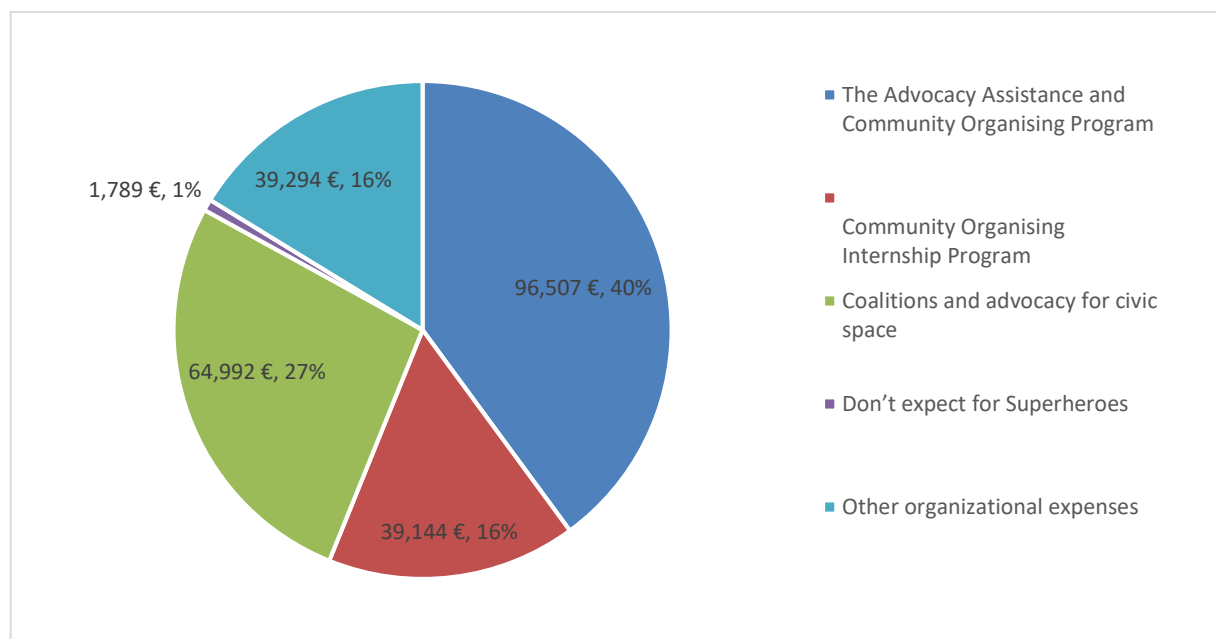


Figure 3. 2020 Expenses

Expenses 2021	
The Advocacy Assistance and Community Organising Program	196,384 €
Community Organising Internship Program	16,832 €
Coalitions and advocacy for civic space	74,287 €
Don't expect for Superheroes	1,045 €
Public Participation Awards Gala	35,910 €
Other organizational expenses	24,616 €
TOTAL *	349,072 €

** It also contains budgets allocated to partners*

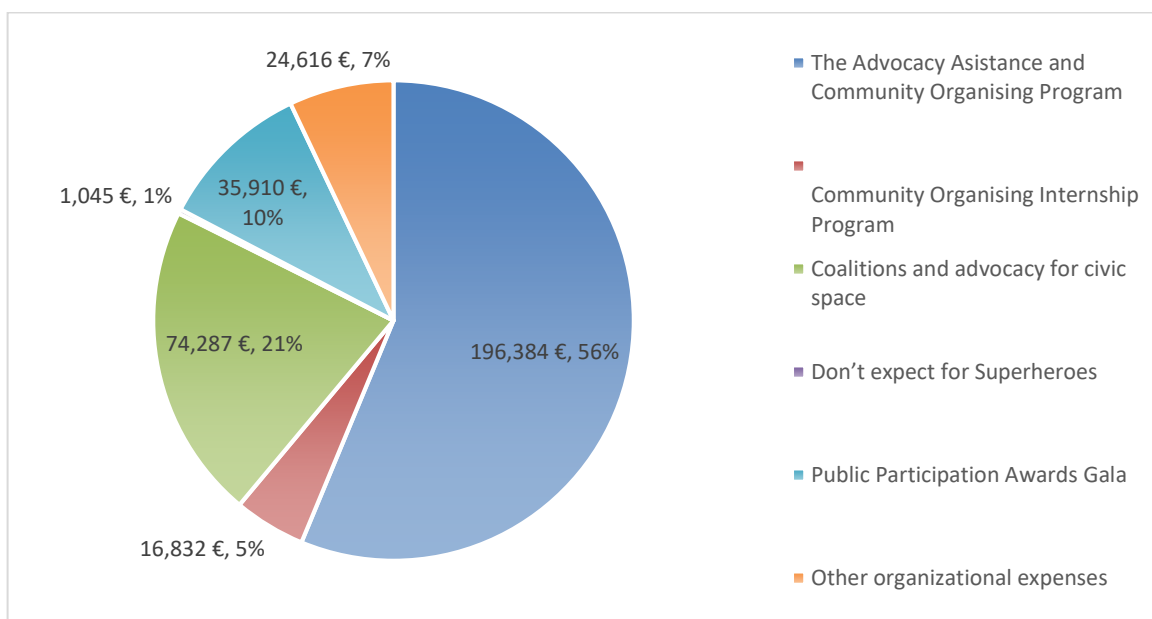


Figure 4. 2021 Expenses

Incomes 2020	
Open Society Institute Foundation	13,513 €
WSOS Community Action Commission Inc.	22,587 €
Network of European Foundations	25,581 €
Civic Innovation Fund	4,959 €
Erasmus +	5,550 €
Civic Europe Foundation	4,124 €
Incomes from the economic activities	5,872 €
Incomes from contributions and sponsoring	126,869 €
TOTAL *	209,055 €

* Conține și bugete alocate partenerilor.

Incomes 2021	
Romanian American Foundation	4,138 €
WSOS Community Action Commission Inc.	17,257 €
Network of European Foundations	72,138 €
Romania Active Citizens Fund program - Grants SEE 2014 - 2021	113,261 €
Civic Europe Foundation	46,000 €
Incomes from the economic activities	11,614 €
Incomes from contributions and sponsoring	103,027 €
TOTAL *	367,435 €

* Conține și bugete alocate partenerilor.