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The Public Participation of Civic Initiative Groups during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Romania. An Exploration of Public Participation Definitions, Obstacles, and Opportunities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the daily lives of citizens, their interactions with their communities, the nongovernmental sector and the public administration, as well as threatening the continuity of the civic initiatives they had developed. This paper draws on the scientific literature on public participation and uses qualitative methods of inquiry (semi-structured interviews) to explore how external factors, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, affected the public participation of citizens organised in civic initiative groups in Bucharest, Romania. One key contribution of the study pertains to the interplay between practice and the conceptual level of public participation. In this respect, the results showed that many members of civic group perceive it to be genuinely contradictory in practice in their definitions of public participation. However, their ideal visions of public participation in genuine democratic politics are markedly collaborative. The research showed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civic groups has been quite limited, adding obstacles to public participation but also enabling opportunities. In particular, it can

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be concluded that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing challenges. It should also be noted that co-creation of public services can be defined by a certain level of continuity, especially in the case of civic groups that were involved in co-initiation.

Keywords:
civic groups, co-creation, COVID-19 pandemic, public participation

1. Introduction

The common discourse on public participation is characterised by a prevailing consensus on its tantamount importance for communities, democracy, citizenship, human rights and environmental protection. If public participation, at the level of its guiding principles, is not only unequivocally beneficial but also crucial for the common good, its main challenges seem to lie in its practice. Thus, the main points of debate seem to revolve around improving practices for successful collaborative public engagement. Moving away from the lay discourse, however, academia brings a more nuanced perspective to light. Even in cultures with a broader tradition of public participation (PP), such as the United States, there are constant definitions and redefinitions of the concept in the academic world, alongside practice-oriented debates about the limitations of genuine citizen participation from the non-governmental sector and advocacy groups. This ongoing interest in the concept and its practice, whether from a scholarly perspective or from a grass-roots and institutional perspective, fuels the need for ongoing research on the topic. An intrinsic feature of civic groups is that they are constantly working, talking, and acting according to general guiding principles that need to be reflected in their actions. The broader of this article, then, also lies in the interplay between theory or conceptualisation and practice. Moreover, citizen engagement in the public sphere is constantly subject to external challenges as diverse as electoral cycles, economic crises, climate change, threats to public health threats, and the like. The COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of which is unprecedented in the globalised world, is one such fundamental challenge to PP that bends and exposes its limits. Therefore, alongside the interplay between principles and practice, the fundamental research problem is how external factors affect PP, as the most significant pandemic strain has brought the practical aspects of PP into focus. Consequently, the research examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PP, the disruptions it has caused, the obstacles it has erected, and even whether and how it has altered or not the definitions of PP. It also focuses on exploring the resilience of civic engagement by highlighting the continuity of activities of citizen initiative groups in their response to the pandemic, their interactions with NGOs and public administration, and the opportunities that have emerged from the public health crisis.

The research builds on the paradigm of participation proposed by Innes and

Booher (2004) which goes beyond the interaction of two actors (citizens and the government) and instead sees participation as a multidirectional interaction between citizens and other actors whose goal is to influence activity in the public arena (Innes and Booher, 2004). As their view on PP is more collaborative, the theoretical ground of this paper is also enriched by the papers by Jacob Torfing and Eva Sørensen (Healey et al., 2008) and Mouffe (2005), who discuss the benefits of agonistic or adversarial participation, as an integral part of democratic politics. The importance of this theoretical framework is more poignant when we look at the common understanding and practice of public participation in Romania, where citizens mostly encounter government as adversaries; their public engagement is often carried out through activities that put pressure on the authorities to act in the interest and according to the needs of the citizens, to respond to abuses by those in power or to threats to an already fragile quality of life of the community. Although most civic groups are born in response to dangers in their communities where government resolution is lacking, has taken too long, or is at a standstill, it is important to recognise that there are also civic groups born out of initiatives that aim to improve and develop communities and bring innovative ways of public participation. Another important dimension addressed in this research relates to the involvement of civic groups in co-creating public services as well as "co-authoring" urban space planning from the position of informed citizens.

As the literature on this topic in Romania can still benefit from further research, this ongoing research has a broader scope than the pandemic context and aims to address more general aspects related to public participation in civic groups: the definitions provided by members of these groups, the internal organisation of civic groups, their possible trajectories towards a more formal organisation into NGOs, public participation, class, and the like. The research is multidisciplinary and draws on a variety of sources from administrative studies, sociology, and political science.

2. Theoretical framework

Public participation is a broad term that is often used interchangeably with other similar terms in both scientific and lay discourse. For Yang and Callahan (2005), PP is the broadest concept among a series of similar but distinct concepts such as citizen involvement, citizen participation, political participation, and civic engagement. Furthermore, according to the authors, the concept encompasses the participatory activities of different categories of actors, such as citizens, media or nongovernmental social groups (Yang and Callahan, 2005). Nabatchi and Leighninger, offering a citizen-centred definition, (2015) suggest that PP is an umbrella term used to describe "activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 14).

There is an extensive and growing literature on public participation that ranges from the now classic and widely referenced articles such as Sherry R. Arnstein's (1969) *A Ladder Of Citizen Participation*, to similarly classic papers by Verba and Nie (1987), Almond and Verba (1989), studies that reframe the concept as a multidirectional set of interactions in a collaborative perspective (Innes and Booher, 2004), others that explore agonistic participation (Mouffe, 2005), or the 'over-ontologising' of citizen participation between collaborative and agonistic tendencies (Wymeersch, Oosterlynck & Vanoutrive, 2018), a wide range of papers on co-creation and co-production of public services (Torfing, Sørensen, & Røiseland, 2016; Bovaird et al, 2014; Agger and Hedensted Lund, 2017; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016), a growing literature on participatory budgeting (Dohotaru, 2022; Džinić, Svidroňová, & Markowska-Bzducha, 2016; Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021), studies focusing on citizen participation in relation to planning (Day, 1997; Grant, 1994; Hanna, 2000), participation as an element of effective governance (Callahan, 2007), or Romanian studies on public participation and public policy process (Baba *et. al*, 2009), to name a few.

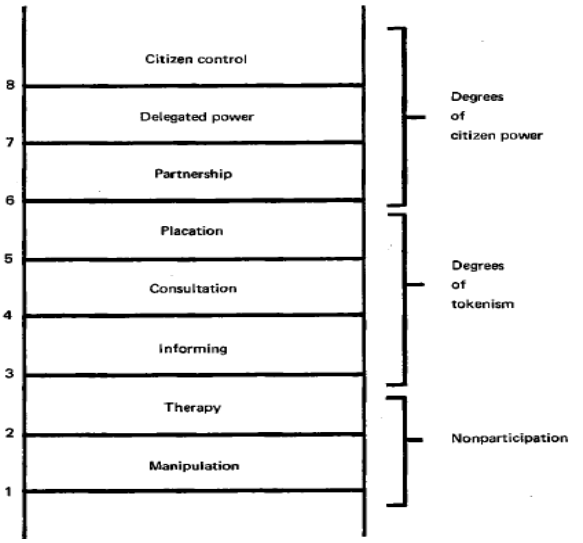
2.1 Public participation: a contested, ambivalent and dilemmatic concept

While public participation is presented in the public discourse in a broadly positive vein, academic literature on the topic, even scholarly papers from decades ago, have brought different shades to its conceptualisation. A key line of inquiry, particularly one that draws on the theoretical frame of development planning, addresses the ambivalence of the concept, the dilemmas and paradoxes around public participation that seem to define the literature review on the topic and 'scare' the practitioners, according to Innes and Booher (2004). Benveniste (1989) saw the main dilemma of planning and participation as being that planning requires a certain amount of participation, while it also needs to be careful not to become dominated by too much participatory involvement. Day (1997) went further and argued that citizen participation in the planning process is a fundamentally contested concept and that both the theoretical and empirical literature about it is disorganised, with the empirical literature defined by a "considerable confusion about what participation looks like in practice and little consensus about what exactly citizen participation is supposed to accomplish" (Day, 1997, p. 422). The theoretical, on the other hand, is "based on a set of normative values and criteria that differ with respect to what their authors believe are the substantive and procedural desiderata of the role of democracy in the administrative state" (Day, 1997, p. 422). Day also reviewed a number of papers by scholars who have pointed to negative aspects of participation, ranging from topics such as the impossibility of substantial citizen involvement in the modern administrative state, the danger of increased mobilisation heightening political conflict, or that the "outcomes of participatory processes will not truly reflect the aggregate of citizens' preferences or interests because relatively few people take advantage of the opportunities for participation that do exist" (Day, 1997, p. 425-426).

For Arnstein (1969), the definition of citizen participation revolves around the critical aspect of citizen power, focusing on those who lack real power, the 'have-not citizens', who are "excluded from the political and economic processes", and for whom the concept is better understood as "the means by which they can bring about significant social reform that will enable them to share in the benefits of an affluent society" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Furthermore, she argued that "participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). She proposed a model for understanding citizen power using the well-known ladder metaphor (Figure 1) with eight levels of participation and non-participation.

Figure 1:

Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation



Source: Arnstein 1969, p. 217

Along these lines, it can be argued that vulnerable groups, marginalised citizens, people living on the margins of society have little or no chance of accessing genuine public participation, or in terms of class analysis, the practice of public participation in contemporary democratic societies is mostly the privilege of the middle and upper classes. This line of inquiry has not been the focus of this research, but it is worth noting

similar papers that explores this issue as it relates to the limits of participation. Other work that supports such conclusions is Grant's (1994) study regarding municipal planning in Halifax, Canada, which takes a bleak view of the practice of democracy by contending that citizen activists involved in the planning process may not represent the public interest, but reflect acting in their own self-interest and even exclude other citizens who are dissenting. Furthermore, she concludes that participation can actually be considered a luxury in these societies because it relies on several categories of resources, such as money and time, which many citizens lack. In a similar vein, there are studies that examine the issue of social justice as an integral part of public participation. One more recent study found that despite good intentions, local participation can reproduce inequality and that marginalised voices are still not heard (Clark, 2017). Building on Almond and Verba's (1989) findings regarding obstacles such as skills, political knowledge, civic education, and political socialisation, Clark (2017) further develops the papers of other scholars regarding other potential determinants of public participation, such as socioeconomic status, the relationship between these individual characteristics and stratification theory (education, income, and occupation), structural aspects related to race, gender, ethnicity, and the line. Quick and Bryson (2022) also caution that most public participation is not really inclusive, and that the citizens who end up being involved in participatory processes tend to be those who are already easily employable, who are eloquent in the language and logic of decision-making, or who are accustomed to public arenas. These limitations and dilemmas of public participation can be further explored during times of external disruptions, such as the public health crisis that was brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which can exacerbate problems of inclusivity.

2.2 A paradigm of public participation beyond adversarial versus collaborative dualism

If the literature review presented so far has aimed to highlight a few key contributions of rather classic papers that still inform contemporary academic discourse on public participation, it is also necessary to include more recent theoretical contributions on the topic that better shape the framework of this study. In this research, we draw on the paradigm of Innes and Booher (2004), who propose to move beyond a dualistic view in which only two actors dominate: citizens and government. They argue that the simplistic dualistic view encourages 'adversarial participation' and does not integrate other actors into the model (Innes and Booher, 2004). Furthermore, they argue that "participation must be collaborative and it should incorporate not only citizens but also organised interests, for-profit and non-profit organisations, planners and public administrators in a common framework where all interact and influence each other and act independently in the world as well" (Innes and Booher, 2004, p. 422). Rather than using the usual war metaphors, they base their proposal on authentic dialogue and collaborative participation, through which even disadvantaged groups are helped to become organised and identify representatives who are able to voice their concerns

(Innes and Booher, 2004). Returning to one of the broader concerns of this research, the exploration of the interplay between theory and practice, the authors argue that "collaborative participation thus dissolves many of the dilemmas of theory and practice" (Innes and Booher, 2004, p. 430).

All the above said, the way in which the Innes and Booher paradigm is used in this research owes an important clarification the critique of the deliberative democracy model on which the former authors were based by Jacob Torfing and Eva Sørensen (Healey et al, 2008). For Torfing and Sørensen, this particular understanding is based on an overly consensual view and is more in line with the arguments brought forward by Mouffe (2005) and Young (2002), who believe that removing antagonism from democratic politics is detrimental because it alienates some groups of the population who do not find a democratic outlet for their demands. Following Mouffe (2005), Torfing and Sørensen (Healey et al., 2008) argue that in an agonistic democracy, difference is valued and opponents are seen as adversaries who draw on democratic rules and norms in a pluralistic democracy, not as enemies to be eliminated. Torfing and Sørensen (Healey et al., 2008) further argue that although Booher acknowledges the importance of agonism, it is not considered an organising principle.

It should also be noted that polarised views of participation, which are divided between adversarial or agonistic and collaborative or deliberative democratic politics, have long been a source of academic reflection, particularly in planning theory. However, Van Wymeersch, Oosterlynck and Vanoutrive argue that "in recent years, there is a growing tendency of scholars attempting to move beyond this rather dichotomising view of participatory planning processes" (2018, p. 2). They also believe that moving away from 'over-ontologising' and looking more at empirical reality can help accommodate the different views of democracy used by different actors in their specific interactions (Wymeersch, Oosterlynck & Vanoutrive, 2018). Therefore, although the main basis for conceptualising public participation relies on Innes and Booher (2004), we also take into account and pursue the potential of agonistic or adversarial tendencies in our empirical work.

Exploratory research on participatory planning processes in Romania (Voinea & Profiroiu, 2022) suggested that the majority of the participants in the survey and the focus group leaned towards collaborative participation. However, looking at their responses regarding the interaction between citizens and authorities, the same study indicated a somewhat adversarial perspective, with a strong "need for intermediary actors or structures to guide public participation" (Voinea & Profiroiu, 2022, p. 74). Another study that tackled participation explored how Bucharest City Hall encourages transparency and citizen participation compared with the French case of Paris City Hall (Cujbă, 2022). Employing website analysis when evaluating criteria such as access to information, consultation, and active participation, the article concluded that Bucharest City Hall does not encourage public consultation or participation, resulting in a visible lack of information, all leading to civic apathy (Cujbă, 2022). A similar conclusion about the low emphasis on transparency from the authorities was also

identified in a study conducted in Romanian ministries. However, it noted that some progress had been made in ensuring transparency (Androniceanu, 2021). Even though transparency and access to information are marginal in this research, they must be briefly mentioned as they often impact good governance and democratic participation, especially in its collaborative component.

2.3 Experts and informed citizens in the co-creation of public services

The classical and more recent theoretical redefinitions of PP that have been depicted previously could further benefit from the introduction of the concept of co-creation, which helps to transform traditional ways of understanding (Torfing, Sørensen, & Røiseland, 2016, p. 10) public participation, especially that organised in civic initiative groups. To explain the changing realities and paradigms since the 1960s, especially those brought about by the New Public Management, the authors propose to complement Arnstein's (1969) classic metaphor with a new "ladder of co-creation", "which has the systematic engagement of relevant public and private actors in the co-initiation, co-design, and co-implementation of new solutions that work as its telos" (Torfing, Sørensen, & Røiseland, 2016, p. 10). Although it is often used often interchangeably with the term 'co-production' and has an important connection with terms such as 'social innovation' or 'collaborative governance', the authors distinguish it from these and define it "as a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competencies and ideas that enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes, or through innovative step changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it" (Torfing, Sørensen, & Røiseland, 2016, p. 8).

Other scholars have contributed to unravelling and defining a similar concept of co-production, including Bovaird et al. (2014), Agger and Hedensted Lund (2017), or Loeffler and Bovaird (2016), to name a few. In this research, we have used the concept of co-creation as it is functionally more appropriate for the activities of civic initiative groups. Furthermore, we built on other research that has looked at the public service delivery involving different types of co-creation, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the research of Meričková, Nemec, & Murray Svidroňová (2015) in the Slovak case or those related to participatory budgeting (Dohotaru, 2022; Džinić, Svidroňová, & Markowska-Bzducha, 2016; Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021). Research about the role of non-profit organisations (NPO) in the restoration and urban design of the dilapidated municipal cultural property in the Slovak Republic concluded that citizens should evolve from the passive role of public services consumers "to active subjects and participate more, either as members of NPOs or informal groups of civil society" (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the growing citizen engagement has been analysed from a different angle: the perspective of co-authors in urban space planning, along with design professionals who should learn from them (Erixon Aalto and Ernstson, 2017). This does not mean that professionals will reduce their skills or lose their professional authority, but that they can gain knowledge by empowering citizens to become co-authors. This topic has also been addressed by scholars who have concluded that citizen participation leads to the creation of informed-citizens, Irvin and Stansbury argue along these lines that "informed and involved citizens become citizen-experts, understand technically difficult situations and seeing holistic, community wide solutions" (2004, p. 56). It can be argued here that because of this implication, PP has exclusionary potential for vulnerable or marginalised groups with low cultural capital and does not automatically imply social justice, a disadvantage already discussed in Clark's (2017) research.

Setting aside debates that criticise the knowledge monopoly of experts or technocratic elitism, Fischer (2000) argues that citizens are more intelligent than many conservative politicians suggest. He further argues that "although citizens need experts, the experts themselves, especially policy experts, need the help of citizens far more than their professional ideologies acknowledge" (Fischer, 2000, p. 34). For the author, 'advocacy research' represented the first stage of a collaborative relationship between citizens and experts, whose main goal was to empower citizens, especially to represent the interests of the unrepresented and powerless (Fischer, 2000, p. 37-38). Although Fischer (2000) believes that advocacy helped to make expertise available to groups that had not been part of the decision-making process before, he concludes that advocacy has not fully succeeded in realising true citizen participation. Instead, his proposal is concerned with more participatory forms of deliberation, where experts need to find ways to relate their technical practices to public discourses, to forge closer relationships with citizens, arguing that public problem solving and democratic governance "would be better served if the technically oriented, top-down expert-client relationship were replaced by a more professionally modest but politically appropriate understanding of the expert as a 'specialised citizen'" (Fischer, 2000, p. 46).

Nabatchi & Leighninger (2015) add to the academic papers already presented a two-category division of PP, between indirect participation (voting and donating money) and direct participation. The latter takes three forms: *thick participation*, the most powerful, which "enables large numbers of people working in small groups (usually five to fifteen in a group) to learn, decide, and act" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 14); *thin participation*, where people act more individually than in groups, e.g., filling out petitions, providing feedback on public services, and people "are often motivated by feeling a part of some larger movement or cause" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 17); *conventional participation*, which they define as providing "citizens with checks on government power […] the most common form of direct participation because it is entrenched in most of our public institutions and often required by law" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 21).

2.4 Instances of COVID-19 impact on public participation

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to ripple through societies around the world, empirical research on its impact on PP is still ongoing. This is the main reason why most of the literature presented in this section has focused on sources that have addressed PP beyond the pandemic. In the case of Romania, there are few papers that have addressed the impact of the pandemic on PP. In a related field, several reports have shown that civil society organisations (CSO) saw their activities intensify during the pandemic, becoming important actors that complemented government capacity where it was lacking (USAID, 2021), particularly by supporting the health care system or social services, especially for vulnerable groups (World Bank, 2020). CSO sustainability was stable or improved slightly during the pandemic in certain areas, such as organisational capacity, service delivery and sectoral infrastructure (USAID, 2021). In terms of the changes the government brought to citizen services, Burlacu et al. (2021) conclude that "the pandemic accelerated the need for digital governance. However, the modalities of action remain open" (2021, p. 1).

Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participatory budgeting, Dohotaru (2022) argued that a number of pilot experiments in Romania, several were suspended, even though their digital design was considered mainly to address social problems such as those raised by the pandemic. Similar results were found in the case of participatory budgeting in Slovakia, where many local governments decided to suspend participatory budgeting (Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021). Using a legal-dogmatic method, Baranowski (2020) analysed the issues encountered during the pandemic in organising the participatory budget process in Poland. The author considers it one of the most critical tools for PP. Some key conclusions of the article were that the attempt to adapt the legal status to the pandemic context was not effective, that use of new technologies should be prioritised at each stage of the process, and that the authorities and the residents need "to develop a new level of cooperation" (Baranowski, 2020, p. 34).

Other research on PP during COVID-19 has shown interesting results, such as Pantić et al. (2021) who concluded that the pandemic can be seen as a "change initiator in public participation, including participation in urban and regional planning" (2021, p. 14), with changes mainly related to the introduction of technology and new forms of online participation. Their findings suggest that a combined approach of face-to-face and virtual forms of participation "in the post-COVID-19 era would spur a larger number of stakeholders and their diversity, which is considered the ultimate precondition for a successful and meaningful participatory process" (Pantić et al., 2021, p. 14). A successful case of PP in decision-making was documented in the Netherlands, where the citizens were consulted and their responses were taken into account regarding measures that dealt with the mitigation of lockdown measures (Mouter, Hernandez, & Itten, 2021). Using a new method of Participatory Value Evaluation, citizens were asked to choose from a number of options and the results informed policy makers' decisions. At the European Union level, a study that analysed

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relatively newly introduced mechanism of the European Citizens' Initiative showed no significant decrease in the number of initiatives registered compared to the pre-COVID period (Drugău-Constantin & Anghel-Sienerth, 2022).

3. Methods

In order to explore the topic of PP based on the theoretical grounds highlighted above, a main objective was set with three related research questions. The general aim of the paper is to explore how external factors, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, affected PP of citizens organised in civic initiative groups in Bucharest, Romania.

- The first research questions are quite general and go beyond the pandemic: how do civic groups define PP and how has the COVID-19 pandemic changed their existing definitions?
- The second question: what were the main obstacles to and opportunities for PP brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- The third question: how did the definitions and practice (establishment, organisation, activities, involvement in co-creation of services, and the like) of PP in civic groups shape their response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Finally, the fourth question is: what are the limits of PP in terms of aspects such as collaboration between civic groups and authorities or the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the identified definitions of PP and its practice? This question relates to the context of the pandemic, but also more generally.

The complexity of the topic of PP, which involves the constant interaction of multiple actors, as well as the fact that there is limited in-depth research on civic groups in Romania, led us to the use of qualitative methods of inquiry. Nine semi-structured online interviews were conducted in Bucharest in May 2022. The interviews were conducted with representatives of civic groups, members of the NGO sector and public authorities (Table 1). Therefore, the sample of interviewees consisted of six representatives of different civic initiative groups, representatives of two NGOs involved in community organisation and advocacy, and a local councillor of one of the *sectors*[4] in Bucharest. The sample is not random in a strict sociological sense, as almost all civic groups in Bucharest (approximately 40 with varying levels of current activity) were contacted with a request for an interview. The list of civic groups used to select the interviews was the one maintained by the *Centrul de Resurse pentru participarea*

4 Administrative unit of the Municipality of Bucharest. Bucharest is divided into six such administrative units.

publică (CeRe)[5], the most important NGO in Romania that supports civic groups and their activities. It should also be noted that the number of civic groups in Bucharest is not evenly distributed in each sector, therefore several sectors have more active public engagement in this form and consequently a larger number of groups. The interviewed representatives of the civic groups are therefore among the sectors with the highest activity. The interviewed local councillor was recommended by the representatives of a civic group as the person responsible for communication between the municipality (the sector unit) and the civic groups.

Table 1:

List of interviewees

Acronym	Type of actor	Main field of activities	Years of activity of the NGO/civic group
AB	NGO representative	Community development	21
CD	NGO representative	Community development	12
EF	Local councillor	Public administration	2 (as local councillor)
GH	Civic group founding member	Creation and improvement of green spaces and playgrounds	2
IL	Civic group founding member	Protection and improvement of green spaces	6
MN	Civic group representative	Ecological activities, promotion of the history and culture of the neighbourhood	5
OP	Civic group founding member	Ecological activities, infrastructure improvement, cultural activities	6
RT	Civic group founding member	Creation and improvement of green spaces, infrastructure improvement	8
VU	Civic group founding member	Infrastructure improvement	9

Source: Authors

The interview questions for the civic group representatives revolved around the establishment of the civic groups, their main activities, their internal organisation and hierarchy, their interaction with government and with the third sector, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all these aspects from its onset in 2020. The more general question of how members of civic groups understand PP was also addressed. The

5 Resource Center for Public Participation.

questions asked during the interviews with members of NGO and the local councillor largely covered the same topics, this time to explore the specific perspectives of other key actors in the public sphere.

The main limitation of the method used relates mainly to the sample of respondents. Firstly, more interviews with representatives of public authorities should be conducted for future research. The local councillor of Sector 1 may be an exceptional case in terms of the quantity and quality of interactions with civic groups. Future research could attempt to interview representatives from other sectors in Bucharest with similar responsibilities. Regarding the members of civic groups, the sample mostly consists of founding members who have a higher level of engagement than full members, which may change their definitions of PP. Follow-up research could also target ordinary members for interviews or even in a quantitative inquiry, which could provide additional insight as it would reach more citizens with different levels of engagement and definitions of PP or different experiences of the pandemic.

4. Results

Interviews with the main actors involved in PP yielded a rich source of information, covering general aspects such as how they understand and define the concept, how this relates to the practice, and how the pandemic has changed all this. This chapter presents key findings along these main dimensions, which are also synthesised in Table 2.

Table 2:

List of civic groups according to activities, types of co-creation of public services, reason for establishment, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Civic Group	Main activities	Type of co-creation	Reason for establishment	Impact of the COVID-19
1	Creation and improvement of green spaces and playgrounds	Co-initiation	Response to a problem or problems	No basis of comparison as the civic group was created during the pandemic
2	Protection and improvement of green spaces	Co-initiation	Response to a problem or problems	Transparency of public authorities' actions decreased leading to more arbitrary decisions that impacted the community and their response

3	Ecological activities, promotion of the history and culture of the neighbourhood	Co-initiation Co-design Co-implementation	Improve the quality of life in the community	Delayed activities (events) Face-to-face meetings could not take place
4	Ecological activities, infrastructure improvement, cultural activities	Co-initiation Co-design Co-implementation	Improve the quality of life in the community	Delayed actions (events) Face-to-face meetings could not take place Public hearings with the mayor were no longer organised
5	Creation and improvement of green spaces, infrastructure improvement	Co-initiation	Response to a problem or problems	-
6	Infrastructure improvement	Co-initiation	Response to a problem or problems	Protests could not be organised Public hearings with the mayor were no longer organised Face-to-face meetings were not possible

Source: Authors

4.1 Understanding public participation from the viewpoint of civic group members

The accounts gathered from interviews with civic groups, NGOs and authorities made a significant contribution to understanding how they define PP in the complex urban space of Bucharest, revealing networks in constant transformation before and during the global phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A key dimension in defining PP was the relationship between civic groups and local authorities (concerning both dialogue and decision-making), which many interviewees perceive as adversarial. The main frustration of RT. is that mayors, local councillors and other public administration staff do not understand that they are at the service of citizens:

> "*I want to make them understand that we are the bosses. I am sorry to put the problem in these terms, but they need to understand that this is what they are actually paid for. And they need to come and talk to us, to find projects together. (…) to do it democratically*". (RT, civic group leader)

For VU, a civic group leader, PP is perceived as "the activity of participating in decisions that concern you (…) because if we don't tell them [the authorities] exactly what we want and what we believe is good, the authorities do as they see fit". For VU,

achieving the changes they desire is contingent on expressing their needs, involving citizens in every step of the projects that affect the community, and, last but not least, keeping citizens informed. VU goes on to argue that citizens are more likely to agree and cooperate if they are informed about changes in the urban space from the outset through consultations or public debates. It can be concluded that what is at stake in the VU's vision of collaborative citizen engagement is the democratic process itself and the representation of elected officials in their mission for the common good. Regarding the adversarial nature of the relationship between citizens and authorities, as a representative of the NGO, CD believes that

> *"a tendency towards real collaboration (…) cannot exist. The moment it exists, the authorities have less incentive to do their job. By being directly affected by problems, people can get more involved than the authorities and it can come to the point of… why bring money to the state when the state is asleep? (…) I think pressure is the only way to cooperate".* (CD, NGO representative).

The views on public participation from the NGOs representatives interviewed added an additional layer of definition that distinguished between civic and public participation. For CD, PP means influencing public decisions, "it's more about advocacy, community organising and influencing" authorities. Civic participation is generally about community development, such as "planting a flower with your own money", and can also include public participation, since the civic groups with which they work are 99% involved in influencing public decisions. AB, the representative of another NGO, offers a slightly different conceptualisation in that she considers that civic groups are more involved in civic participation, which to her means that "citizens see problems and establish a relationship with the authorities to ask them for ways to solve these problems in their community". For her, PP is a "larger umbrella which includes civic participation and in which individuals act for the common good (…) somehow in this idea of transforming the community in a more inclusive, healthy, and resilient community". If for RT, as a representative of a civic group, PP is ultimately at stake in the democratic process itself, then for AB, in addition to the different categories of activities that she builds on the basis of the concept, it also has a larger scope. The larger scope, therefore, is one that is concerned with "restoring a thread in the social fibre of society, restoring faith in the community, and bringing people the power to see that they themselves can make a difference in their community". She further argued that the context of the pandemic was an "huge existential leap" or an "test of maturity" for civil society. She recalls that it was an emotional moment for her, witnessing the "unprecedented wave of solidarity" that the pandemic had triggered, it was a surprise to see how local communities responded when the authorities were unprepared. As AB recounts, the pandemic made visible the importance of building an infrastructure for civil society, what she calls "the infrastructure of good" or the "industry of good", in which local organisations that were previously supported by

NGOs, such as the one she represents, "knew how to activate resources, to find solutions. (…) For me, the beginning of the pandemic was to see communities starting to sustain themselves and not wait for things from the authorities".

The research also included an interview with a representative of the authorities, a local councillor. In her experience, a key development in PP in the sector in which she works has been the involvement of citizens in volunteer programmes organised by the local authority (mostly revolving around the care of urban greenery), with many volunteers also being members of civic groups. Furthermore, as a further step towards PP, she mentioned the fact that some engaged citizens have since applied for jobs in public administration. From her narrative, we can draw a more collaborative view of PP, defined by open and ongoing dialogue, sometimes even bypassing lengthy formal procedures for efficiency purposes.

Here it is also important to note the working definition of PP offered by the Romanian NGO CeRe: "the process by which citizens and organisations express their needs and aspirations, advocate for their interests and rights, and contribute to public policy-making and decision-making, and respond and demand accountability to public officials and institutions"[6].

4.2 The establishment of the civic groups, organisation, and co-creation of public services

The history of civic groups and community organisation in Bucharest dates back to 2009, according to a report by CeRe (2011), an NGO that was actively involved in the creation of these initiatives. A project led by CeRe since 2009 focused on establishing and supporting six civic groups from six neighbourhoods in Bucharest to develop their own advocacy campaigns. Initially, they selected civic initiatives that were already involved in activism, such as the group in Lacul Tei which organised a protest against the parking ban on Lacul Tei Boulevard in 2008 (CeRe, 2011, p. 9). Since then, a number of other civic groups have been formed in Bucharest, either with the active involvement of CeRe or organically formed at the community level, currently numbering close to 40[7].

The establishment of civic initiative groups in Bucharest falls into two main categories of motives. The first category is civic groups that are formed in response to a problem or multiple problems, a perceived threat to the community, or an issue that significantly affects the quality of life of the citizens. Research has shown that these problems are varied, but mostly related to the use of urban space and its infrastructure, for example, e.g., illegal structures or parking lots, deteriorated or inadequate infrastructure (roads, sewage system), lack of playgrounds, green spaces and parks or

6 https://cere.ong/english-version/ (accessed May 15, 2022).

7 https://cere.ong/grupuri-civice-si-organizatii-grassroots-din-romania/ (accessed May 15, 2022).

threats to the existing ones, pollution, and the like.

The second category of civic groups was organically born out of the initiative of a small group of people in a particular neighbourhood who came together to improve the quality of life in the community. For example, they focused on organising cultural events such as walking tours to explore the history of the neighbourhood, and maintain and improve the park in their proximity, and the like. The initial activities of these groups later expanded to include other activities identified after consolidation of the civic group. CD (NGO representative) believes that there are these two extremes in the typology of civic groups and that the middle ground is missing, "because we don't yet have a culture of involvement. I think there are only extremes and not any middle ground". For AB, the other NGO member, what makes people "furious" in their community compels them to act, and with the support of NGOs, they are given the tools and help to make a long-term strategy for their actions.

The reasons for starting civic groups also correlate with the type of co-creation of public services they became involved with (Table 2). Groups that were formed in response to a problem followed a co-initiation trajectory, while those whose founding reason was to improve the quality of life in the community engaged in a more complex co-creation: combining all forms (co-initiation, co-design, and co-implementation). In addition, there appears to be a constancy between the services they developed at the outset and during their follow-up, even during the pandemic when this was possible.

The importance of electronic communication technologies in the activities of civic groups, their establishment, their interaction with local authorities, and as a key medium for pressure on the government is clear. It should therefore be noted that another key actor in the establishment of the groups has been social media (Facebook), which is an essential tool for the organisation and even initial establishment of civic groups. Most of the civic groups interviewed were founded by members who knew each other and decided to form a Facebook group. Only one of the interviewed groups had met face-to-face while walking in the same park. However, Facebook became a useful tool for everyone for further organisation and communication alongside other types of traditional communication and mobilisation. In the second case, RT said that she brought members to the civic group by contacting her neighbours and even her former colleagues from university. For VU, 2013, when they created the civic group's Facebook page, is considered the moment of the group's birth, because before that they had only had casual conversations with neighbours. Moreover, for one civic group Facebook became a key tool in putting pressure on the public administration. GH says that they continuously posted and commented on the mayor's Facebook page, showing screenshots of unfulfilled election promises, which eventually convinced him to take action so that his public image would not be further damaged. Thus, it can therefore be concluded that PP, as defined by the Bucharest civic groups, depends heavily on social media. This may raise further questions about the inclusiveness of PP in this form for people with low levels of digital literacy, such as the case mentioned by CD of a woman from a civic group in a poor neighbourhood who has difficulties using the

internet. In the context of the pandemic, however, the high reliance of civic groups on social media allowed for continuity in their activities, especially since few civic groups had regular face-to-face meetings.

4.3 Limits of public participation

The profile of citizens actively involved in civic groups in Bucharest is quite homogeneous. We can state that they are men and women with a high level of education, financially stable, employed, aged 30-65. Many of them are parents and this is reflected in a large part of the activities related to the improvement of infrastructure for parents and children, especially playgrounds and parks. In addition, it should be noted that the vast majority had no previous solid experience of civic engagement. VU is one of the few who admitted to having been involved and familiar with other civic initiatives. Finally, none of the civic groups interviewed had focused so much on engaging vulnerable groups in their activities or representing their needs. This can be explained by the fact that many communities are themselves quite homogeneous and people in the neighbourhood tend to live among similar individuals. Findings from interviews with members of civil society revealed that considerable effort on their part goes into research, acquiring expertise, knowledge and jargon on a variety of topics such as laws, public administration procedures, urban planning, ecology and many other legal, technical, or social aspects that are fundamental to public participation in urban space.

Most interviewees, both NGO representatives and members of civic groups, claimed that it is more difficult for people from marginalised communities to engage as they have more pressing problems and low resources for PP. From her experience with civic groups from middle class and marginalised communities, CD believes that one of the key issues is that "vulnerable groups in Romania are very vulnerable, they don't have the energy and hope to fight for their rights". AB also thinks it is a matter of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when people do not have money, it is very difficult to fight for something bigger, "it doesn't even cross your mind that you could get involved in your community".

The profile of civic group members also influences the quality of their actions, particularly their ability to become informed or skilled citizens and to acquire expertise that helps them influence decision-making. Interview results also show that civic group members devoted a great deal of resources (time, money, etc.) to researching the issues they wanted to change. Two of the interviewees admitted that they acted as detectives in an effort to understand and uncover complex problems related to urban planning, laws and other procedures. This was based on their view, which was also guided by the NGOs that offered them support, that any successful civic initiative must be based on data and facts. GH said that for a petition she had to estimate the number of people in her neighbourhood, but as it was a relatively new petition there were no official statistics. She finally found a creative way to get the data by looking at the building

permits for the blocks of flats and estimating the number of inhabitants based on the number of flats.

4.4 Obstacles faced by the civic initiatives groups in continuing their activities

The main barrier to undertaking their activities, as identified by the civic groups, related to the constraints placed on face-to-face meetings. This did not necessarily mean that they reduced the number of meetings, but that they moved online, which affected the quality of interaction, as they admitted that interaction and decision-making on digital platforms were inferior to face-to-face. However, as many of the participants are busy and have limited spare time, this move to online meetings allowed some of them to engage more easily.

Another challenge for the civic groups was precisely related to their activities, as they could no longer organise protests or events. For example, a civic group had to postpone an event ('The Games of the Neighbourhood') for almost a year, one example of civic groups and activities that do not address issues but aim to strengthen and build the community. Around the same time as the outbreak of the pandemic, another civic group was formed. Their activity took place on Facebook, where the group gathered new members and made decisions. The most active member of the group carried out research during the pandemic that supported their request to establish playgrounds and to open a nearby park to the public.

From an NGO perspective, on the one hand the pandemic brought an unprecedented civil society response for AB, on the other, for CD the other representative of the NGOs interviewed, PP was greatly affected. The main issue is the legislative changes (Government Decision No. 636, June 9, 2021, item 27) adopted during the pandemic to limit the right to public assembly to a maximum of 100 people. In CD's view, this was an abusive measure that was kept in place longer than necessary. Civil society has been protesting against this measure since 2021[8] and considers it an abusive restriction on the right to free assembly of civil society. The negative impact on the activities of the civic group was also mentioned by VU who said that they were not able to organise protests and "without protest, things progress even slower". In terms of civic group activities, CD's experience as a community organiser showed that people had a hard time and found it more difficult to focus on struggles with a larger impact. She further added that they found it more difficult to keep in touch with neighbours or to organise face-to-face meetings because of the limited number of people who could attend. Her conclusion is that the civic groups that survived were those with a longer history, with closer links between members who already had an established regime. In terms of citizens' relationship to public space, which she

8 https://www.greenpeace.org/romania/articol/6230/societatea-civila-solicita-eliminarea-restrictiilor-abuzive-impuse-adunarilor-publice/ (accessed May 10, 2022).

considers symbiotic, she argues that the pandemic made it more inaccessible.

4.5 Obstacles to communication between civic groups and public administration and in the response of the public administration to citizens' requests

The first year of the pandemic coincided with local elections in Romania, so many elected officials were new to the position. This brought an additional layer of changes in PP beyond those already in place to curb the pandemic. The local councillor interviewed during this research had taken office in 2020 and claimed to have encouraged PP by first addressing the communication problem. She stated she tried to bypass formal procedures and initiated direct communication with members of civic groups in the sector, as the formal communication chain was lengthy. IL, a representative of a civic group working in the same sector, admitted that their communication with the authorities was not significantly affected because they had a direct channel of communication. He further added that they were also able to participate in meetings with the Ministry for the Environment and the deputy mayor of the municipality.

One of the recurring aspects of the obstacles encountered by members of civic group and NGO representatives was the increased delays and difficulties in communicating with local authorities. It is important to note, however, that this characterised cooperation between citizens and public administration even before the pandemic. CD cites instances where public hearings were rejected by the authorities or should have been held online, but with low success rates. The worst consequence was that urgent matters were delayed or dismissed because of the pandemic context.

At the beginning of the pandemic, RT believed that this would have a positive impact on the digitalisation of public services and collaboration with civil society. However, she saw limited improvements, and could only cite one example of effective digitalisation, and that was in the area of parking services. Her overall assessment was that the pandemic had had a negative impact. In VU's experience, in the sector in which she lives, the local authorities organised online public debates and also in 'hybrid' format (with both online and offline audience). However, apart from this positive aspect, the number of public hearings decreased. It can therefore be concluded that the pandemic was a missed opportunity for public authorities to accelerate the real digitalisation of their services and communication with citizens.

The obstacles faced by NGOs in carrying out their activities during the pandemic are similar to those mentioned above. One category of NGO-specific obstacles, according to AB, is that it most affected activities that depended heavily on direct intervention in the vulnerable communities. She gave the example of the Community Foundation in Cluj-Napoca, where NGO members had to have meetings in the community, knock on people's doors and meet with them. She argued that the

pandemic has had a major impact on the vulnerable communities, "which become more vulnerable in times of crisis. There were many jobs lost there (…) Why would you care about civic participation when you don't have your basic needs covered"?

5. Discussion and conclusions

This final chapter focuses on assessing how the empirical work has provided significant answers to the research questions and how these have informed and contributed to the theoretical framework.

The first research question aimed to capture how civic group members understand and define PP, as well as whether there has been any transformation determined by the complex societal changes triggered by the pandemic context. First, although slight differences in their definitions can be traced in their understanding of the concept and its practice, a common feature, in line with Nabatchi & Leighninger's (2015) conceptualisation, is that their activities pertain to a version of thick participation. Civic groups in Bucharest engage large numbers of people, even hundreds for certain petitions or protests, and are coordinated by a core group generally consisting of two to eight (in some cases even one) permanent active members. This core is involved in voicing the needs of their community, in learning, researching or gathering knowledge about key community issues, in making decisions to affect change, and in taking action to influence public decision-making, while keeping authorities in check and demanding accountability.

The findings suggest that the PP paradigm outlined by Innes and Booher (2004), who emphasised the collaborative tendency, is quite limited in understanding the complexities of civic group engagement in the Romanian context. Consequently, the theoretical positions of Jacob Torfing and Eva Sørensen (Healey et al., 2008) and Mouffe (2005), which lean towards the benefits of adversarial participation, could better explain the specificities of PP in this local context. As shown in the results chapter, many respondents view PP as intrinsically adversarial in practice and collaborative, only in its principles and ideal paradigm of real democratic politics.

Participants' perspectives on ideal democratic politics could also be detailed through the next research question, which aimed to explore the limits of PP during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their accounts are consistent with the limitations previously detailed in the literature review section, identified by scholars such as Arnstein (1969), Grant (1994), Almond and Verba (1989), to name but a few. The involvement of vulnerable people in Bucharest's civic groups remains modest. Furthermore, civic group members only marginally acknowledge that this is an issue that needs to be reflected on or addressed in practice. In this respect, another key aspect contributes to this situation, namely the fact that PP involves citizens with a higher

level of education, income and social status, people who are already or have the profile needed to become informed citizens. This conclusion therefore supports the findings of Irvin and Stansbury (2004), Fischer (2000), Erixon Aalto and Ernstson (2017) and other researchers who have examined the aspect of expertise as a key variable for effective PP and advocacy.

The remaining two research questions revolve around the impact of COVID-19 (obstacles and opportunities) on civic groups' activities or their definitions of PP. Most importantly, it can be concluded that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of the civic groups largely depended on the specifics of the type of PP they were already engaged in. Contrary to what was initially assumed at the beginning of the research, the pandemic had a more limited impact on the groups. The fact that they relied heavily on digital sources from their foundation, such as Facebook, helped to ensure continuity of their activities and reduce the negative consequences of not being able to hold face-to-face meetings. If one of the key actors of their activities, the public space, took a back seat and was limited to them during the pandemic, the other actor, digital platforms, was given more priority.

Obstacles and challenges in their interactions with the authorities during the pandemic only exacerbated already existing problems. Even before the pandemic, citizens were already used to delays in updating their initiatives when interacting with public authorities, with some citing delays of up to seven years to successfully complete a project. However, they still complained that public hearings were no longer held. Regarding delays, many of them saw their activities postponed due to lockdown restrictions. It is worth noting that there has been little improvement in the trend towards digitalisation of public administration services. In practice, however, this is rather perceived as a lost opportunity as its effects are very limited. It was also positive for civic groups that NGOs involved in community organising and advocacy have maintained their activities and continued to offer assistance, even as they have adapted to the constraints of the pandemic. Although not necessarily within the scope of this research on civic groups in Bucharest, but relevant to the topic of PP and the opportunities triggered by the pandemic, it should be noted that the crisis brought about a significant increase in the mobilisation of citizens as volunteers who offered support in the areas of health care and social services. Finally, it should be noted that the co-creation of public services can also be defined by a certain level of continuity, especially in the case of civic groups that were involved in the co-initiation. It can even be suggested that co-initiation is a more resilient form of co-creation in the context of external challenges such as the public health crisis.

The preceding observation is one avenue that future research on co-creation of public services in its various forms could explore, particularly as limited empirical data was available in interviews with civic group members regarding this particular concept. Another limitation of the research, as was detailed in the methods sections, relates to the sample of respondents. The discussion on the limits of public participation could benefit from a deeper and more in-depth survey that could focus more on vulnerable

groups. One recommendation would be to undertake in-depth research focusing on the few civic groups made up of people from vulnerable communities. In this respect, other local contexts, even rural areas, could be the target of future social research.

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