



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

Experiences in “Letting the Public in”: Tentative Conclusions on the Administration-Public Tango for Co-Responsible Local Governance

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ABSTRACT

Governance and citizenship issues are more complex, and communities recognize the need for a new approach to mobilization, participation in creation and welfare, and a joint responsibility for the implementation of public life management principles. The paper proposes a view of Romania’s struggles to work from the bottom up by experimenting with various European models in a common framework of local administration to encourage citizen participation. After initial enthusiasm for a process led by the Council of Europe aimed at creating co-responsibility areas, administrative practices showed that local governments refused to grant the prerogative of leading public policies and distributing budgets. The model of co-responsibility aims to restore participatory democracy, ensure sustainable development, and reconfigure relations between social actors such as governments, enterprises, civil society, families, and individuals. However, progress has been slow, and as the example described in Timișoara, Romania’s largest western city, shows, it has still a long way to go before the implementation of participatory governance, for example, in the form of budget allocations, is appreciated positively by the local population. This paper is based on participatory observations, media monitoring, and the study of key actors involved in promoting co-participatory processing at the local level.

KEYWORDS

participatory democracy, well-being indicators, shared social responsibility (co-responsibility), participatory budget, co-creation, neighborhood democracy, vignette

Received 1 November 2023

Accepted 17 March 2024

Published online 5 April 2024

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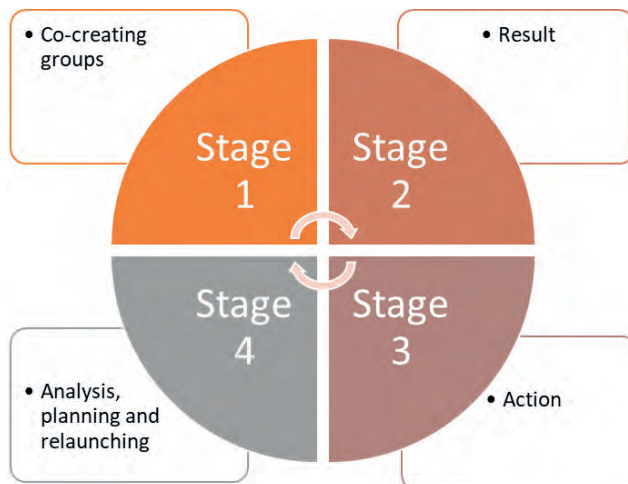
Introduction

The concept of “co-creation” is sweeping all sectors of public life, from government affairs to business relations, from cultural consumption to settling social unrest. In a nutshell, co-creation means the inclusion of various actors who are willing and bring their knowledge, skills, and resources to develop and achieve a solution and create value that cannot be achieved without cooperation (Agger & Hedensted Lund, 2017; Vargo et al., 2015). In public administration, co-creation of policies is presented as the appropriate response to the many challenges posed by the 21st century vortex-like evolution, demanding reforms of the systems, improved organizational efficiency, a stronger commitment to such objectives as ensuring the economic, social welfare, and environmental sustainability expectations of communities (Bagirova & Notman, 2020; Rösler et al., 2021). Co-creation is defined 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 types of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that improve 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 et al., 2019)

Co-creation of public services and policies is considered a promising practice of reshaping the traditional relationship between the state and its citizens, businesses, and NGOs (Hržica et al., 2021). Based on existing literature, the author of this study proposes the following graphic representation of the process (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Co-Creating Cycle



In the first stage, a decision needs to be made on how to recruit participants in the co-creating groups, what the rules of engagement are, how to adopt decisions, and how to capitalize on results. In the second, the results are analyzed and planned for implementation. The third stage operationalizes the plans and finally the impact of the actions is evaluated for relaunching the process, as a fourth, but not the last stage. A successful process allows for a renewal of the cycle.

Internationally, co-creation is promoted vividly by such bodies as The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011). At the European Union level, the concept is seen as an embodiment of subsidiarity principles and bottom-up processes that lead to increasing the legitimacy and efficiency of the administrative activities. The countries of the European Union strive to develop compatible (and even convergent) models, as they share values associated with the rule of law and democratic principles (Thijs et al., 2018), but also recognize that there are significant differences between national (and local, for that matter) public administrations, derived from cultural, political, historical, and administrative traditions (Ongaro, 2019). Post-Communist countries that are currently part of the European Union (EU) recognize their transition-related issues that were highlighted by EU requirements during the membership negotiation, which unveiled vulnerabilities, lack of critical structures and administrative capacity, the over-politicized nature of administration, lack of transparency, undeveloped participation, and lack of traditions for letting the public in (Ágh, 2004; OECD, 2023; Rösler et al., 2021).

Letting the public in active and meaningful participation in shaping administrative affairs is a long and sometimes painful process, with numerous examples of drawbacks and resets along the way, like in a tango where partners behave like equals but display an elegant fight over power. European initiatives to stimulate citizen participation show that there are success stories, but also numerous barriers in ensuring a functional model for co-creation in public administration, such as structural barriers (Baptista et al., 2020), organizational culture (Tummers et al., 2015), organizational structure (Andrews & Brewer, 2013), lack of expertise (Lember et al., 2019). Often, despite advocacy favoring bottom-up approaches, opening public administration on the local level is piloted by top-down, state, and governance policies (Haruță & Radu, 2010; Tummers et al., 2015). Public participation itself is a legitimate topic of inquiry since there are numerous examples of lack of interest or willingness to participate in public life, despite existing frameworks, as shown by Sherry Arnstein (1969), who identifies eight levels of involvement of citizens in public life. According to her model, the bottom levels of the ladder are represented by concepts such as *manipulation* and *therapy* tactics, which correspond to a non-participation culture. The next two levels are *informing* and *consultation*, labeled tokenism since citizens are viewed as passive actors. The three upper levels depict citizen power, with the public showing increasing progress of decision-making influence capacity. Citizens can engage in *partnerships* with public institutions, exercise delegated power over public matters, or function as *citizen control* (Arnstein, 1969; Collins & Ison, 2006).

Instruments of public participation are numerous, from voting, polling, public debates, public meetings or hearings, petitions, comments and suggestions, mailings,

advocacy initiatives, up to citizen juries, watchdog groups, advisory groups, etc. (Fishkin, 2009), as instances of deliberative/proximity or direct democracy, as the current terminology describes as specific for the 21st century (Council of Europe, 2021). Surveys on participation, viewed from the officials' perspective, or focusing on public perceptions show that while participatory techniques are generally considered beneficial and have a positive impact on final proposals, require time, patience, professional direction, and commitment. Obviously, cooperation bears both advantages and disadvantages for the parties involved in the co-creation of public policies, as remarked by Irvin and Stansbury (2004). When the public is successfully allowed to enter, the greatest gain is not in the participation outcomes themselves, but in the increase of the confidence in their knowledge and capacity, a greater awareness that their opinion counts, and better trust in the authorities (Nared & Bole, 2020). Of course, as Pevnaya et al. (2020) show, the organizational structures of the public need to be prepared to make full use of the opened possibilities.

OECD proposes that public participation is possible on the condition three basic principles are met: *transparency*, meaning that governmental activity must be placed under public scrutiny; *accessibility*, which implies that citizens must have the possibility to access and use public information anytime and anywhere; *responsiveness*, i.e., capacity of governments to respond efficiently to new demands and needs coming from the citizens. However, a nuanced view on the issue shows that post-communist societies still suffer from the mock democracy they had to endure in the form of forced participation in certain types of community activities, often in the interest of the dominant party. Therefore, the culture of participation needs to be carefully nurtured and encouraged beyond the mere creation of a legal framework. It requires effort, commitment, long-term commitment, and reassessment.

Against this background, the undertaken research follows, in diachronic perspective, the evolution of co-creation processes in Romanian local public administration, as an instance in post-communist countries and their challenges in dealing with new models of shaping public life. The research question addressed in this study deals with identifying grass-root experiences with letting the public into sharing the responsibility of public administration. Based on direct observation, participatory research and long-term monitoring of local projects, this research aims to identify whether there is a continuity in pursuing a responsive, open, and modern administrative model at a local level or not, respectively whether there can be identified a sustainable frame of co-responsible action that citizens can rely upon irrespective of changes in the leadership of the administrative bodies.

Materials and Methods

The present paper zeros in on the example of Timișoara, the largest city in the western part of Romania, which experiments boldly with European models even from their "beta" versions of policy proposals for public participation, as an example of struggles and tango dancing to accommodate citizens' expectations and demands while maintaining a functional administration at the local level. The approach adopted

for this study is a hands-on approach in a research action paradigm, in the manner described by Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin:

People do two things: they make observations ... and they perform actions. The most important difference between making observations and performing actions is the intention with which they are done ... In making observations, the intention is to discover what is the case, i.e., it is theoretical ... However, in performing actions, the intention is to bring about change, that is, it is practical. (Greenwood & Levin, 2007)

Molineux (2018) described the action research method as one that is both participative and reflective. It is typically about worthwhile practical purposes, democracy and participation, many ways of knowing, and emergent developmental responses (McKernan, 2006; Reason, 2006; Vickers, 2007). It builds on the author's participation in monitoring or steering citizen participation processes and/or participation as a member of target groups in processes curated by administrative bodies since 1990. The processes analyzed in this article are presented as vignettes, built to highlight the political will that underpinned each of the processes, a summary of activities, and an evaluation of the capacity of the process to remain relevant over time (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Lieberman, 1987). Vignettes are used as qualitative tools in social science research, offering a short, carefully constructed description of a situation (in this case), representing a systematic combination of characteristics, allowing for novel insights into complex processes (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). In constructing the vignettes, the author of the present study followed the outline proposed by Lieberman (1987):

- context;
- presentation of actors (who were involved);
- what happened;
- impact (if any);
- comments.

The proposed vignettes aim to capture policies relating to co-creation practices identified in the last two decades in Romania at a local level.

Results and Discussion of Romanian Experiences With Citizen Participation

In the post-communist period, public administration has been transformed from the executive of legal forms to the main funding source of public affairs and an important public services provider, responding to the needs and legitimate expectations of the residents of the administrative unit (Popescu, 2017). Post-communist Romania developed the legal framework for regulating the activities of public authorities, democratic participation, and citizen control under the guidance first from the Council of Europe and later of the bodies of the European Union, as part of negotiations to join these European bodies. Currently (as of 2023), the main documents that regulate citizen and stakeholder participation in the management of public affairs are those presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Legal Framework for Citizen/Stakeholder Participation

Law	Focus	Types of citizen/stakeholder participation
Constitution of Romania (Constituția României, 2003)	Contains the fundamental principles, outlining fundamental freedoms and the roles and competencies of different state bodies	Right to petition, right to legislative initiative, obligatory cooperation between the government and “social bodies,” the Economic and Social Council
Law No. 52 <i>Privind Transparența Decizională în Administrația Publică</i> [On Decisional Transparency in Public Administration] (Lege nr. 52, 2003)	Establishes minimum procedural rules to ensure decisional transparency within central and local public administration authorities and other public institutions in relation to citizens and their legally constituted associations	Public consultation processes for draft laws and other regulations at local and central levels, and citizen and stakeholder participation in public meetings
Emergency Ordinance No. 57 <i>Privind Codul Administrativ</i> [on the Administrative Code of Romania] (Ordonanță de Urgență nr. 57, 2019)	Provides a framework for the organization and functioning of public administration authorities and institutions, among others	The general obligation of public authorities and institutions to inform and submit to public consultation, debate draft normative acts, and allow citizen access to the administrative decision-making process, as well as data and information of public interest. Also describes the process of consultation between the central and local authorities
Law No. 367 <i>Privind Dialogul Social</i> [On Social Dialogue] (Lege nr. 367, 2022)	Regulates different forms of social partners and the relationship between them and the state	Participation in decision-making processes through social dialogue commissions (at the central and local levels) and the National Tripartite Council for Social Dialogue

Note. Source: developed by the author.

At the local, municipal level, public administration is achieved by the cooperation between the elected Local Council (renewed through elections on party lists, every four years) and the more stable City Hall, which employs civil servants, but is led by the mayor, who is also elected.

In case of divergence in opinions between the mayor and the councilors, the mayor usually has the upper hand. The mayor may have democratic reflexes and invite councilor and citizen participation or may only limit the consultation processes to the minimum requirements included in the law. Reports show that many instances of participation in urban settings in Romania were inspired by different international organizations or resulted from internationally funded projects, whether the initiatives were recognized as such or not. Timișoara was exposed early to European influences, the Council of Europe creating, at an early stage, in 1992, the Intercultural Institute, a nongovernmental organization to promote civil society development actions at local, national, and international levels, intercultural values, active citizenship, social inclusion, and respect for human rights.

Almost three decades of experiences illustrate what Ploštajner and Mendes (2005) call “double democratization” processes, since both local administration bodies and the civil society learned to support each other, make each other possible, and limit each other in the participatory processes. At times, citizens felt that they lacked power because in acting on bottom-up initiatives they encountered barriers or facilitators as preconditions for being heard, such as that the request met some international demand, that the administration wanted to take action and it happened that its efforts went in the same direction as the citizen initiative, that the leader of an NGO enjoyed national or international prominence, and only in the last instance were the institutions convinced that the group represented by the NGOs should be satisfied. According to the 2012 Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit and measuring the state of democracy in 167 countries, Romania was in the 59th place, being evaluated as “flawed democracy” (Baltador & Budac, 2014). The scores calculated on a scale from zero to ten for Romania showed a relatively high score for the electoral process and pluralism (9.58), but a low score for political participation and political culture (4.44 and 4.38, respectively). How these data are reflected in action, at a local level, is presented in the following vignettes.

Consultative Councils or “Neighborhood Democracy” in Action

In 2001–2002, the Local Government Assistance program, sponsored by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), facilitated various citizen participation techniques to help solve local problems in 26 cities from 15 counties in Romania. Against this program, Consultative Councils of Citizens (CCC) were formed to address specific issues. In Braşov, for instance, the consultative group participated in the shaping of the public transportation system in 2001. In Turnu Magurele, the mayor started a consultative group on education. In Mediaş, Piteşti, and Timişoara consultative group consisting of retired persons was formed, inviting those who desired to work on a volunteer basis with the city administration to establish such groups. In addition to the Consultative Council of the Elderly in Timişoara, in 2003, the local City Council passed a decision to form neighborhood consultative councils in the traditional districts of Timişoara, to start cohesion processes, and to better address the needs of a city in full transformation. The rules indicated that a consultative council needed at least seven people to come together and express their desire to discuss various aspects of collective life. They voluntarily considered themselves representatives of education, health, culture, services, and commerce, residents associations, etc. interested in forwarding bottom-up in dialogues with one of the vice-mayors, designated to coordinate and bring the results to the local council debates. Of the 14 proposed Neighborhood Consultative Councils, 12 were successfully established.

The model was borrowed from Mulhouse in France, a town with which Timişoara has “twinning” relations, and the then mayor of Timişoara appreciated the French model to be a vivid and inspirational form of participative democracy at the local level. The elected Local Council promised to provide space for organizing meetings of the consultative councils, but unlike the politically elected councils, the consultative ones worked completely voluntarily, without financial compensation. Neighborhood councils were seen as instruments of citizen participation, to enrich the decision-

making process in the local public administration, with the scope of commonly pursuing local public interest actions, works, services, and projects. Despite the large coverage of consultative council formation in the media, in a survey carried out in 2005, only 27% of locals were aware that such councils existed (Badea, 2005). Furthermore, only 35% of those who knew about the committees were interested in getting more information, and only 6% tried to contact the members of these committees. Some years later, around 2011, there was a massive dropout of these councils, motivated by fatigue, lack of efficiency, citizens' perception of limited impact on public policies, and weak connections between politics and community (Schiffbeck, 2019). Almost two decades later, in 2023, only two are still having meetings and some sort of activity. Of the four stages of the co-creation cycle, described in Figure 1, only the first two were visible to the public, while the action on public proposals was often obscured in the political-administrative process, and relaunching the action seemed to lack entirely. Enthusiasm for contributing to the meetings of the co-creating groups diminished over the years, and recruitment for volunteers slowed down. The consultation processes proved to be tiresome, the success stories few, and the new mayor (elected in 2012) abandoned the organization of common sessions with these citizen groups in favor of Facebook¹ consultations (Robu, 2018).

Timișoara—Territory of Co-Responsibility

Another form of consultation was facilitated by an initiative group that tested the idea of implementing the concept of “co-responsibility” in public administration in Timișoara (2007) and later (2009) created the Center for Ethical and Solidarity-Based Resources and Initiatives (CRIES). CRIES accessed generous financing through the European Social Fund and implemented the project entitled *Rolul Dialogului Social în Promovarea Incluziunii Sociale Active* [The Role of Social Dialogue in the Development of Active Social Inclusion] in eight major cities in Romania (Institutul Intercultural Timișoara, n.d.). Overall, in 2011 the project managed to involve about 1,500 residents of eight major cities (Arad, Bucharest, Brașov, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Oradea, Sibiu, and Timișoara) in discussing their perceptions of well-being and developing well-being indicators. The results, processed with ESPOIR software for the statistical analysis, were used as a basis for developing action plans for sustainable and co-responsible societies in the eight mentioned cities. The local coordination group and moderators who were willing to work with citizens in the process underwent special training in handling public meetings and to preserve the methodological coherence of the process. A total of 164 groups were involved in such consultations, giving 15,354 responses (with an average of 93.6 messages/group). This resulted in 59 indicators grouped into eight main families or areas. The indicators thus obtained were brought back to citizens for validation. In this way, citizens who have been part of the process could see what has been done with their responses and how these responses were used. The eight families (preestablished by the Council of Europe) were:

¹ Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

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- (a) access to means of living;
 - (b) living conditions/framework of life;
 - (c) institutional relations;
 - (d) personal relationships;
 - (e) social equilibrium;
 - (f) personal equilibrium;
 - (g) feelings of well-being/ill-being;
 - (h) attitudes and initiatives.

As a distinctive feature of the process, it must be highlighted that the Local Coordination Groups activated and invited in the consultation process a large diversity of citizens, rarely touched by other inquiries, such as single mothers, persons affected by chronic diseases, prisoners, homeless people, people from families affected by the migration phenomenon, alongside with what is usually called the elite in society: cultural actors, academia, entrepreneurs, civil servants. Among the responses, one could find contrastive ideas as “well-being equals finding a place in the night shelter” (homeless person) to “well-being in the city means finding a parking spot near institutions where one has problems to solve” (entrepreneur) or “well-being means having support services for childcare” (mother). A city geared toward serving its inhabitants must find appropriate responses for each request. Furthermore, public policies must address such a diversity of needs (Cernicova-Buca, 2012). The educational element—and probably the most powerful—in the deliberative meetings organized to build the well-being indicators proved to be the question “What are you ready/willing to do to enjoy well-being?” Classical surveys ask only for or against a given set of questions. For many of the citizens involved in the process of describing well-being, this has been the first moment to understand/reflect on their own responsibility in the community. It measured the strength of the community, its readiness for action, in terms of involvement in public life and for generating proactive attitudes. And most of all, the responses to this question gave a hint of what reserves of enthusiasm, human resources, initiatives were available in the community.

At the peak of the project, the mayor of Timișoara signed a document aligning the city with European municipalities engaged in creating “territories of co-responsibility,” with stakeholders invited to participate in deliberative processes to shape the future of the city. The event took place on January 25, 2012, in the presence of Maria Ochoa-Lido, the representative of the Council of Europe, the Meeting Room of the Council for head of the Local Timișoara Social Cohesion and Diversity, the Timișoara Mayor, representatives of other authorities and public services, civil society, and citizens. It was acknowledged that Timișoara signed the Charter of shared social responsibility, thus sealing the commitment to the European principles and to the process of joining the interests and views of those who propose public policies, those who implement them, and those who were beneficiaries of public policies and actions (Cernicova-Buca, 2012; Tomozii & Huang, 2022). Similar processes were unfolded approximately at the same time in Mulhouse (France) and Salaspils (Latvia), with an eye on the Council of Europe, which encouraged member states, authorities, NGOs to adopt co-responsibility principles and engage in co-creation of public policies and solutions.

For the Timișoara case, the elections of 2012 brought to power a mayor who did not see value in the process and abandoned the well-being indicators, the idea of co-responsibility and consultation sessions altogether, opting for a swifter, but less democratic consultation via personal social media accounts. The co-creating groups, formed with care and effort, saw the well-being indicators created, anticipated action, but since the process was stopped, they were left with the feeling of unfulfilled promise of a more engaged, democratic administration.

Cultural Projects Such as Co-Creative Experiences and Participatory Budgeting

The practice of involving citizens and stakeholder groups in major decisions was capitalized upon in the period 2011–2016, when the city of Timișoara prepared its candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture. On the initiative of the mayor, the Timișoara European Capital of Culture Association (ECoC) 2021 was created to manage the bid. In 2014, Timișoara became the first Romanian city to develop a long-term cultural strategy, following a participative process (Turșie, 2021). Timișoara 2021 (postponed to 2023 because of the COVID-19 pandemic) applied several participatory practices such as the bidding phase, based on public consultations (through surveys and public meetings), the preparatory years before exercising the title, the implementation of projects announced to be multiannual and based on co-creation. All of these are supposed to be the legacy of the ECoC program. Some of the processes overlap with the latest wave of direct democracy, represented by the adoption of at least partially participatory community-based budgeting. The model is in full development across Europe (Sintomer et al., 2008) and beyond, but in Romania, timid examples can be cited. Although proposed with the persistence of local NGOs, the participatory budget was put on hold by the mayor of the 2016–2020 legislature (Robu, 2018), who believed it to be “populist” and reminiscent of communism. The new mayor, elected in 2020, embraced the idea and started implementing it in 2022. Participatory budgeting took the form of selecting projects to be financed from local funds through public voting on the platform created by the City Hall². The platform is inspired by the Barcelona-based Decidim Free Software Association that sets as goals “the democratization of society through the construction of technology, methodologies, practices, standards, actions, narratives, and values, in a free, open, collaborative, and reflective way” (About Decidim, n.d.). NGOs could upload their proposals for projects financed from the city budget, and the selection of the winners took the form of local voting. In the case of cultural projects and later of NGO-led projects, the co-creation cycles (see Figure 1) were completed and relaunched. The result is only partially satisfactory and led to numerous negative comments in the media, but local civil society groups consider it a promising start for opening the door to a more inclusive and meaningful participation in public affairs coming from civil society. The results are commented on in a variety of manners: the NGO community champions the baby steps; the media is critical of the results and asks for more genuine forms of participation. However, a report on participatory budgeting in Romania places Timișoara as a forerunner, with the largest number of

² <https://decidem.primariatm.ro>

projects submitted for such budgeting and with the largest sums allocated through such a process (Damian & Ile, 2022). Capitalizing on European trends on the matter, researchers and advocacy groups alike argued that local elected officials should embrace participatory budgeting programs as key tools to involve citizens in local decision-making processes and argued that participatory budgeting projects should be designed in collaboration with citizens, civic groups, and NGOs in the community. So far, the results are far from satisfactory, as most public administration officials view participatory budgeting as an “administrative burden” and often do not follow through with the responsibility to actually finance selected projects (Damian, 2022).

From Single Processes to Strategic Choices

The next step, so far, has been initiated by the city hall, which has contracted the services of a PR and communication agency for *The Strategy of Participatory Democracy in Timișoara* (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2023). The public participation strategy is part of the commitments assumed by the local administration through the Local Open Government Action Plan 2022–2023, approved by Local Council Decision No. 211 of May 24, 2022 (Hotărârea nr. 211, 2022). The role of this strategy is to improve the level of participation and involvement of citizens in the decisions that the city hall takes, as well as to diversify the ways in which citizens can get involved. In line with the strategy for the development of public participation, the action plan will focus, on the one hand, on the development of internal skills (tools/processes/procedures/staff training) and, on the other hand, on the development of mechanisms to increase citizens’ civic engagement (advisory councils, other forms of group representation, civic education programs, etc.), mechanisms that will be adapted to the existing reality. The media have already voiced critical opinions that the initiative is simply a dressing window activity (Mîț, 2023).

The public could be let in more vigorously, but ... time will show whether the initiative is merely an electoral tool (2024 is an electoral year for Romania) and whether the next leadership of public affairs will continue to tango with the public, engaged in the co-creative effort. Participation in the consultations towards this strategy left a feeling of déjà vu and encouraged only a cautious enthusiasm. Adopting innovative tools and stabilizing these new decision-making tools will depend not only on the readiness of citizens and citizen groups, but also on the appetite of administrative bodies to engage in the tango and dance it to the end.

Conclusions: Next Stop?

The creation of sustainable communities, even more of a network of such communities, is a long-term process that can only be achieved through a step-by-step strategy. Through participation and more feasible electronic participation, government accountability and project subsidiarity can be achieved together with a balance between economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and environmental quality. The vignettes presented in this study show that, given the willingness of citizens to embrace innovation in public life, a variety of forms of participatory processes can unfold. In Timișoara, some of these forms targeted a “catch all” area (such as neighborhood

councils, called upon to propose anything that mattered at the communal level, or to deduce well-being indicators in a territory of co-responsibility), while others focused on specific areas (such as culture or project budgeting). However, the initial momentum was lost in time, leading to the abandonment of the forms and the search for new ideas. Most of the existing literature on the topic either examines the macro-level of co-participatory processes, looking into the legislative frameworks allowing for sharing responsibility of public good between administrative bodies and stakeholders (public), or present case studies, many of which are project-based.

The novelty of the present research is the diachronic approach, highlighting, through a succession of vignettes, more than two decades of experiences at a local level. Co-creation in public administration presupposes an intensive dialogue between citizens and administrative bodies in shaping the decision-making process. Although co-creation is increasingly seen as a viable way to address contemporary challenges in public service delivery (Voorberg et al., 2017) and managing public life, its main value is learning experiences. Through dialogue, partners pinpoint fundamental problems and seek solutions in a learning process that involves both public officials and citizens. Given the limited academic attention given to the co-creation and co-production of this learning process and its relation to policy change, the present study addressed this issue from a diachronic perspective. The study considered the experiences accumulated from one of the most dynamic cities in Romania, Timișoara, which is seen as a learning city. The vignettes offered insights into the main instances of co-creative initiatives, but also illustrate the hesitations, drawbacks, and fading away of energy in producing a co-responsible local governance. Public weariness, changes in administration, the long time needed for co-creation initiatives to produce visible and exciting results have impacted the consolidation of a model allowing for a reliable, functional process in ensuring that public good is pursued and responsibility for a community's wellbeing is shared by the administration and by the public in the profound meaning of the concept. Most probably, this is the reason for the active search, on a European level, for new forms of attracting citizens into participatory processes.

We believe that there is a potential for future research to address various co-creation points of view through the lenses of administrative tradition in which co-creation (or any other method) is studied and/or implemented. Nevertheless, future research (and practice) should focus on the digital tools supporting co-creation, not only the measurement of co-creation readiness, but also other stages following the readiness evaluation, for example: (a) supporting the selection of services suitable for renewal based on co-creation principles; (b) supporting the whole interactive process of co-creation, and (c) evaluation of the co-creation process. The author of this paper acknowledges limits of research, mainly linked to the fact that it deals with experiences in a big city that is also a regional capital, while smaller towns display a different dynamic and may not enjoy the same potential for innovation in administration. The literature shows that in examining public administration, one needs to consider both administrative traditions and the political culture of the place. Therefore, while the paper contributes to understanding the co-creative processes in Europe, the results cannot be automatically extrapolated to all European countries.

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