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# The Quality of Public Participation Infrastructure in the Post-Communist Community of Targoviste, Romania

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## 1. Abstract

Our future is now more uncertain than ever due to myriad environmental problems that require communal responses. In order to build resilient communities and increase the effectiveness of planned changes to built environments, it is crucial to involve local communities throughout decision-making processes. However, in Romania, the traditions of top-down governance, inherited from its communist period, still hold sway among elected leaders - and, in some cases, its citizens. This is problematic because scholars have argued that top-down approaches to environment-related projects are more likely to fail than bottom-up initiatives that are more inclusive of community interests. This begs the question: How can we more meaningfully involve and empower citizens in Romania and similar places? To help address that question, I examined the quality of the formal participation infrastructure in the community of Targoviste, a post-industrial, mid-sized town in southern Romania. Through Photovoice methodology, 22 individuals who felt an emotional connection with Targoviste shared their experience with the town's participation infrastructure and how historical traditions and post-communist legacies have limited their ability to be meaningfully involved in local authorities' decision-making. The results show that formal public participation in Targoviste is shallow and that there is limited cooperation between local authorities and citizens. Key issues included: consultations announced shortly before they were due to conclude, dysfunctional websites, and unhelpful publicity materials. Rather than encouraging the diverse voices of Targoviste's citizens to participate, the country's authorities appeared to restrict public deliberations and consultations in important ways. This included excluding marginalized social groups, ignoring some active community members, and introducing barriers to participation in settings where public input should be of great import. While the authorities frequently employed a rhetoric of sharing power with the public, its participatory processes were more akin to empty rituals. Nevertheless, both the findings of this work and recent bottom-up initiatives have shown that an active community exists and is interested in bridging gaps with local officials to ensure better place-related development.

## 2. Introduction

It seems logical that citizens are more likely to engage in place-related actions - which refer to actions taken by members of a community to protect or preserve the environment in which they live - if they feel a sense of place attachment, or a connection to that particular place (Manzo and Perkins 2006, Anton and Lawrence 2014). However, that relationship may not be so straightforward. Scholars suggest that a direct relationship between place attachment and place-related action is at best weak and generally inconsistent (Lewicka 2011). There are therefore other factors that affect the relationship between those two concepts, one which is the quality of participation infrastructure (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015).

The main purpose of this study is to examine how the quality of participation infrastructure

might affect the place-related actions that individuals are willing to take in the post-communist state of Romania, and how the relationship between local communities and place-related decision-makers can be improved to ensure a more meaningful public participation process and input. This is an important objective because individuals' willingness to take place-related action - whether individually or as part of a collective response - is linked to the quality of democracy in that place (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Moreover, when members of a community feel empowered, they are more likely to want to take place-related action and participate in self-governance (Manzo and Perkins 2006).

### 3. Background and Literature Review

Place attachment has been defined and researched in different ways across various disciplines. It generally refers to the cognitive and emotional connection between people and places (Low and Altman 1992) and the strength of those positive affective ties between people and their settings (Strzelecka, Boley, and Woosnam 2017, Carrus et al. 2014). Scholars have found that individuals are more likely to engage in place-related actions if they feel a sense of attachment to a place (Manzo and Perkins 2006, Anton and Lawrence 2014).

One particularly common form of place-related action is to engage in public participation processes (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Public participation is an umbrella term that describes an array of processes designed to help determine how a society will manage and protect their environment (Beierle 2010). For example, public participation may include public hearings, wherein a governance board may invite members of the community to comment on a proposal. It may also include public deliberations wherein local authorities facilitate engagement between different stakeholders or invite experts to share their views about an issue facing a community. In short, there is a wide range of existing processes that are typically, though not always, provided through official channels (Beierle 2010). Ideally, these common mechanisms are designed to gather input from members of a community and integrate that input meaningfully in decision-making processes that involve developments that impact the public. But such mechanisms can also be designed to stifle participation, even as they offer the façade of welcoming community input.

In Romania, community involvement is often described as being shallow due to a lack of cooperation between local authorities and citizens (Constantinescu, Orîndaru, Căescu, Pachițanu, 2019). This is a consequence of the fact that civic participation - in the way we typically conceptualize it in the academic literature - did not meaningfully exist under Romania's communist regime (Uslaner 2004). Politically, researchers have argued that policies are poorly drafted, announced with little consultation, and subsequently 'corrected' in haste after they go into effect (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020). For example, in 2003, the Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania (APADOR-CH) monitored the implementation of the first law on transparent decision-making in public institutions. They monitored 93 local and central state bodies in 16 counties and found that only 60% of them had a functioning website and that 80% didn't announce key details about public meetings, which resulted in few and poor public discussions (Baltador and Budac 2014). The participation infrastructure in Romania is therefore often perceived as being closed off to many citizens, with the most important role in decision-making processes being held by the mayor and the local council. With a low degree of direct participation by the community, Romania's citizen participation appears to be situated between levels of consultation (when citizens are invited to express their ideas but there is no guarantee they will be taken into account) and placation (when citizens are involved only to demonstrate that

they were involved in the name of democracy) (Gaber 2019).

The goal of this study is therefore to examine the following overarching questions: Do citizens of Targoviste perceive their town's formal participation infrastructure to be of high or low quality? What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of that infrastructure, and how do they factor into citizens' desire to partake in place-related actions?

#### **4. Method and Data**

To assess those overarching questions, I combined Photovoice methodology with a short survey of participants. Photovoice has proven to be well-suited to capturing important nuances of people-place relationships, as well as with citizens' experiences with place-related actions. Through that method, participants were asked to take photographs that captured predetermined themes (attachment and engagement) and use these photographs as the basis for an open-ended focus group discussion. The complementary short survey asked those same participants a mixture of close-ended and open-ended questions tailored to ideas previously found in the literature.

Participants were recruited primarily on three criteria: (1) a strong pre-existing sense of attachment to the town; (2) their availability and predisposition to participating in scholarly research; and (3) their representations of different aspects of Targoviste's demographics. The final sample was made up of 22 individuals, with 12 women and 10 men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 67, with a median age of 28.6.

All participants who agreed to participate in the research were asked to attend two focus groups, usually held a few days apart and consisting of 4-6 people. A total of five Photovoice sessions were held between July and August of 2021. Complete transcripts of all Photovoice sessions were analyzed qualitatively through the use of thematic analysis, with a particular focus on the quality of participation infrastructure. Relevant quantitative items from the survey were analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics (as the sample was purposive), while open-ended questions were evaluated using thematic analysis.

#### **5. Results**

This study was premised on having participants with a high level of pre-existing place attachment to Targoviste. This expectation was supported in two ways. First, in response to the survey question, "Do you feel a sense of belonging in Targoviste?" the mean rating was 4.31 (on a five-point Likert scale). This illustrated a high personal sense of place attachment, at least on the dimension of belongingness. Second, across different survey items and in the focus group sessions, participants expressed concern about the state of the town's built structures and its public spaces, and expressed some desire to take place-related actions.

With regard to the first overarching question, which inquired about the perceived quality of Targoviste's formal participation infrastructure, it was found that the perceived quality was generally low. When participants were asked in the survey about their level of satisfaction with the local authorities' efforts to involve the community, not a single person reported being very satisfied, and just one person reported being satisfied. The mean response rating of 2.09 for that question (on a five-point Likert scale) indicates a general level of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, 16 of the 22 participants reported that they had not tried to participate in public consultations initiated by local authorities that involved changes to the town's built environment. These quantitative

findings were also borne out in the open-ended survey responses as well as the focus group responses. Those overwhelmingly cast the town's formal participation infrastructure in a negative light.

The second overarching question, which asked about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the formal participation infrastructure, yielded three key themes: (1) consultations that were routinely announced shortly before they were due to conclude; (2) websites that were incomplete, inaccurate, and at times inaccessible; and (3) unhelpful publicity materials. Several participants reported that they believed such infrastructure was designed to restrict participation, such as by excluding marginalized social groups and ignoring some active community members.

For example, in response to an open-ended survey question about local authorities' efforts to involve the community, one participant wrote: "*The dialogue is just a façade. There is no real interest from the authorities.*" Another wrote: "*Public consultations don't actually exist. They appear in announcements that are posted too late.*" A third participant observed that they were "*only an observer, without any real chance to interact [with authorities].*" A fourth participant wrote, "*the emails I sent weren't taken into consideration*" and that "*the communication with the authorities is too weak; [they are] expeditious public consultations, done only as a formality, with superficial expressions.*" Finally, the conclusion of another participant was simply that "*they didn't care about my opinions.*"

These sentiments were repeatedly echoed in the Photovoice focus group sessions. Participants frequently remarked that formal participation infrastructure, such as public hearings or complaint processes, were unwelcoming and confusing. In every focus group, several participants would report having never heard through formal channels or directly from the authorities about some place-related intervention mentioned by another participant. Even the participant raising the place-related intervention would often use phrases like: "*I've heard that...*" "*I understood from several people that ...*," and "*I saw a post [on Facebook] related to...*"

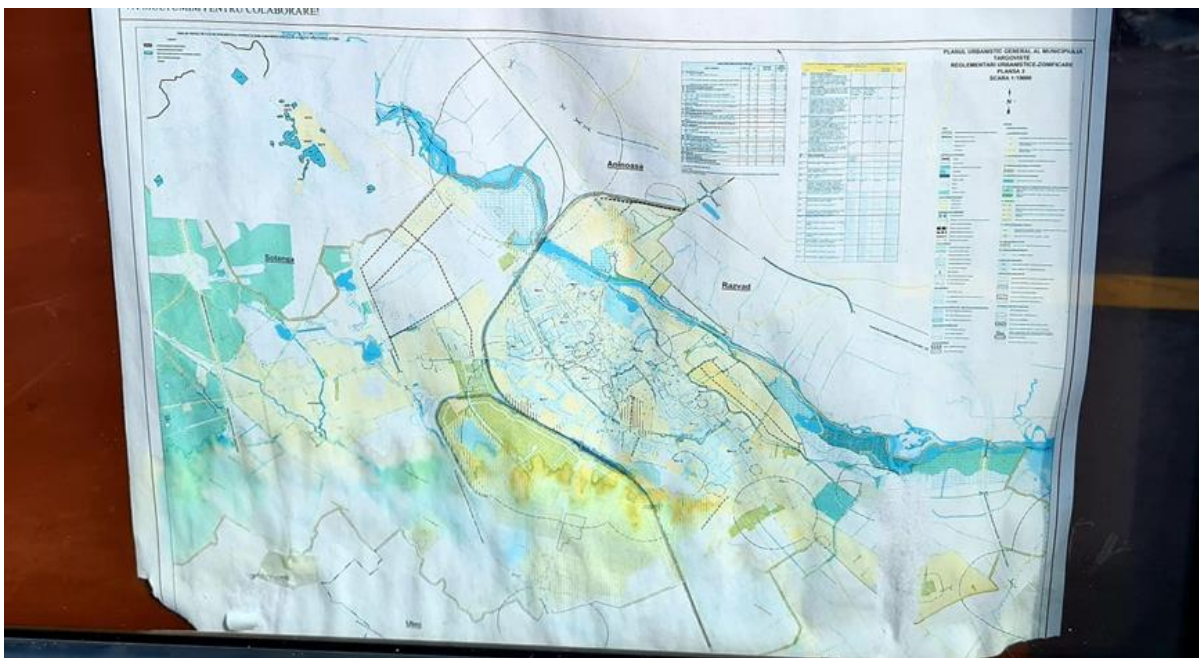
One participant took particular exception with the town's website, which they said could ostensibly serve as a cheap but effective way to at least inform citizens about upcoming actions. They remarked: "*The town hall's website is often down, besides the fact that it is difficult to navigate around. It seems like it is from the 1990s.*"

Some participants expressed cynicism about the local participatory processes, arguing that they were designed to either frustrate or lead to a dead end. For example, one participant said: "*There are local council meetings. You can attend one. You sign up on lists, because ... we are theoretically allowed to go and attend. Practically, that's only going to happen if they [decide to] let you in.*"

In reference to an area of houses proposed for the construction of apartment buildings, one participant remarked: "*I understand it will be an apartment building area. Again, it does not seem appropriate to me, but it was debated in the same style in which public debates are organized in our town: without actually holding a public debate. [The notices] are in fact displayed on the website, but sometimes we see that the announcement was posted just one day before the deadline for submitting comments expires. I think that this is how they post them, very late and sometimes even after [the deadline]. I set out to gather evidence in this regard. I did not [capture all the] print screens but it is clear that there are late announcements, and the debates are not organized in any [public] way.*"

Even in cases where the town does broadly advertise a consultation process, the notice itself can be difficult to decipher and therefore serves as a barrier to participation. The participant

photographed one such notice to illustrate how challenging it was to simply read it (Figure 1). They then remarked: *“I found this public consultation notice on this bulletin board next to the former Cavalry School and I remembered how much we struggled when we saw the announcement, which was posted in other places in the town, about the comprehensive plan update .... I did not photograph this badly. This document has such small writing that it is completely illegible, so no one can understand anything. No matter how hard you try to enlarge the image, it is not understandable. And not only here, but also on the Town Hall website where the announcement was posted. So, they didn’t really want to -- or, perhaps, let’s say they have ignored the fact that this announcement was supposed to inform and show that the authorities are excited about public input or eager to work with the citizens on this important and expected document. We have been waiting for this important document for almost two decades. It is unacceptable that this is happening. But, again, other than just signaling, I don’t know what we can do.”*



**Figure 1. Poster with indecipherable information written on the plan (female, 39 years)**

Multiple participants expressed disappointment with the public participation processes associated with proposed changes to the Chindia Tower - the landmark perceived to be most important in the survey results. One participant reported that they tried to follow all the steps required to get involved, but that even being proactive was insufficient: *“It was not a publicly debated project. You couldn’t find [any information about] it. I requested [the information] and I didn’t receive it. The request was submitted, the deadline passed, and I did not receive any answer. From the discussions that were had, [it seems] they are going to make a change in the appearance of the Chindia Tower.”*

Other participants added that if public consultations regarding changes to major landmarks like Chindia Tower were poorly communicated, then there was little hope for the many other (smaller) interventions that affect communities around the town. As one participant put it: *“Ideally, all these proposals should be publicly debated. Authorities should come and say: ‘We want to add some things to the tower. Do you agree?’ I mean, it’s super important here. If you want to [change] something, do a consultation [and announce it] online, in public, on TV. Inform the people first*

*and prepare them for the coming [change]. ... I don't know who is involved, what expertise those people have, [and] in the end, we don't know much from the public authorities. I'm hearing [about this] for the first time in this discussion. I hope it won't be a disaster, because at least at that level, I hope they won't risk [anything major]. But [that will] depend on who they collaborated with. If some architects or historians were involved, I have no idea. It remains to be seen."*

In the absence of formal infrastructure, several participants pointed to social media as both a tool and space for taking place-related actions and for coordinating collective action, considered by many to be the only way through which citizens in Targoviste can express their thoughts, ideas, and frustrations in relation to their environment. They noted that while there is no assurance that posting in Facebook groups or on one's profile can lead to action, it can at least generate interest and raise awareness among other citizens. One participant recalled one experience where the visibility of social media led to the authorities acting: *"Here is Valul Cetatii. For a short time, it was a garbage dump. However, thankfully, after a few [Facebook] posts it got [cleaned up]."*

Given the multiple frustrations participants repeatedly expressed with the quality of Targoviste's participation infrastructure, and how such limitations not only inhibited taking place-related actions but also forced citizens to seek out new channels for coordinating action, the lack of participation infrastructure was therefore deemed to be a major barrier to taking place-related actions.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The citizens of Targoviste seem to recognize participation as a right they have fought for, but they also believe that it is not really recognized by local authorities beyond meeting minimal legal requirements. Rather than encouraging the diverse voices of Targoviste's citizens, the country's authorities appear to restrict public deliberations and consultations in important ways. Marginalized social groups are excluded, some active community members are ignored, and barriers to participation are introduced in settings where public input should be of great import, such as those involving place-related decision-making. While the authorities frequently employ a rhetoric of sharing power with the public, its participatory processes are more akin to empty rituals. Targoviste's formal participation infrastructure thus indeed appears to be at least perceived by its citizens as being situated between Gaber's (2019) levels of consultation and placation.

By continuing with the same practices, the town of Targoviste risks alienating its citizens not just through its decisions but by its decision-making processes. Those citizens who have not yet given up may yet do so due to feelings of resignation. A recurring sentiment was captured by one participant thusly: *"But now it's too late. Whether we like it or not, life moves on."*

While resignation can be interpreted by public officials (and other citizens) as satisfaction with the status quo and existing participation infrastructure – that is, silence may be misinterpreted as satisfaction – the long-term consequences range from detaching citizens from self-governance to outright detachment from the place. This has social, cultural, and economic consequences for the town and raises the prospect of even more people leaving Targoviste for 'greener pastures' since they will feel fewer connections that anchor them to the town.

This study also lends further support to Lewicka's (2011) argument that there are important cultural differences when it comes to attachment and public participation (one type of place-related action), and that such differences are rooted in social systems and historical legacies of places. It may be a matter of generations before some of the issues identified in this research can be fully addressed. That is because the legacy of communism continues to be felt more than 30 years after

its downfall in Romania. It appears to be clear from the focus group discussions and other evidence that many authority figures in Targoviste consider the public to be uneducated and needing to be saved from themselves. Moreover, it was also clear that many citizens feel unable to contribute valuable input or effect meaningful change in relation to place-related affairs. These attitudes both manifest and compound the poor quality of formal participation infrastructure in the town.

However, these challenges are not intractable and there is reason for optimism. First, there is a clear appetite among a diverse cross-section of citizens in Targoviste to be active participants in its place-related decision-making. Second, social media has offered a robust parallel infrastructure for uniting the town's citizens around place-related affairs. Thus, it is plausible that this appetite and parallel infrastructure can be thoughtfully leveraged to create new avenues for participation using existing resources while those attitudes shift and as formal infrastructure subsequently adapts.

There is already some evidence of this happening. A few citizens of Targoviste recently and voluntarily developed an app that shows the bus routes and timetables in real time. Another group of citizens recently created an NGO called "Restored Targoviste" that aims to raise awareness of the town's monuments and history while drawing attention to their state of degradation and coordinating fundraising to rehabilitate them. These endeavors gained momentum by being shared on social media and gaining acknowledgement from the community members who are using those platforms. As these examples show, citizens are taking matters into their own hands by creating new technologies and using existing informal participation infrastructure to draw attention to those creations and their associated priorities (e.g., improved bus service and the maintenance of landmarks).

These initiatives, although small, offer further evidence of a community that wants to be active, presumably because they still feel an attachment to the place. Moreover, scholars have argued that bottom-up initiatives are more likely to have sustained success and be more inclusive of community's interests. Thus, there is an opportunity for local authorities to capitalize on that energy by seriously rethinking their existing approach to participation through the formal infrastructure they offer. Put another way, the fact that citizens are seeking to circumvent the existing infrastructure can serve as the basis for promoting bold change in community involvement – an endeavor that might not only be good for the public but also for the electoral prospects of those authorities. That in turn can be used to show that a symbiotic relationship based on modern participatory ideals can thrive in post-communist states.

This research contains certain important limitations that merit highlighting. First, it was based on the responses of just 22 participants, none of whom serve as an elected leader or are members of decision-making bodies involving Targoviste's built environment. A good faith effort was made to publicize the research widely, but future work would benefit from a purposive sampling strategy that aims to include local authorities and examine questions pertaining to bridging the communicative and participatory gaps identified through this study. Second, while Photovoice methodology was appropriate for the research objective of this study, there are other methodological approaches that could address some of its shortcomings. In particular, this study is not generalizable as it aimed for depth over breadth, but the use of a larger survey based on a random sample of the population would increase confidence in the results. Additionally, spatial analyses using geographic information systems (GIS) could be used to identify the relationship between community characteristics and both attitudes toward and actual engagement with different mechanisms within Targoviste's formal participation infrastructure. Finally, given the apparent frequent use of social media in Targoviste, it would be possible to perform an analysis of social



media posts on public forums (e.g., Facebook groups) to evaluate the sentiment and concerns that are expressed – whether through computational methods like sentiment analysis or traditional methods like a content analysis.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the formal participation infrastructure in Targoviste is poor and that there is limited cooperation between local authorities and citizens. A cross-section of the town's citizens believe that consultations are frequently announced shortly before they were due to conclude, the town's websites are dysfunctional, and the publicity materials are unhelpful. However, there is also still a clear appetite among citizens to participate in public processes and engage in place-related actions. Going forward, it is important to capitalize on that energy and further explore informal channels for participation – and, in time, address some of the cultural vestiges of communism that continue to constrain formal channels.

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