



## PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN ROMANIAN CITIES: MODELS AND OUTCOMES

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**Abstract.** As of 2022, there has been little research done on the Romanian examples of participatory budgeting. This paper aims to provide an overview of the evolution of participatory budgeting in Romania, focusing on a descriptive analysis of how this particular form of participatory politics has been implemented in the country. To this end, we look at the 11 Romanian cities where participatory budgeting programs have been put in place, how these programs are financed compared to local budgets, and what instruments of interfacing with and involving the wider public were used in each case. This analysis is done using data collected from each city's participatory budgeting platform.

**Keywords:** deliberation, participatory budgeting, active citizenship, political participation, public administration, civic engagement, democratization.

### Introduction

Democratic countries around the world have long been experimenting with new ways to improve governance by creating new ways of directly involving the citizens in the workings of public administration. These tools of direct democracy have seen increased usage, with numerous countries implementing mechanisms like participatory budgeting (Godwin 2018). Participatory Budgeting (PB), among other deliberative tools (such as

public inquiries, deliberative opinion polls, citizen juries, policy dialogues, consensus conferences, regulatory negotiation, etc.) (Dryzek 2000; Papadopoulos & Warin 2007), is one of those ideas aimed at improving current democratic systems by opening up new forms of decision-making to citizens, usually implemented at a local level, where there is a smaller distance between authorities and regular people (Sousa Santos 1998). However, due to it being a relatively new mechanism, we must move beyond the sloganeering around PB and analyse its different methods of implementation with their strengths and drawbacks, as well as the potential barriers to the successful use of PB. Understanding the different ways of setting up PB mechanisms in various countries can help create a set of rules and recommendations regarding best practices for local authorities who are using, or who intend to use this system.

The emergence of PB mechanisms around the world has gathered the attention of researchers and political scientists. Considerable attention has been given to PB in Brazil (Sousa Santos 1998, Souza 2001), Portugal (Alves & Allegretti 2012), Poland (Kebłowski & Crieckingen 2014; Dzinic, Svidronova & Markowska-Bzducha 2014), etc. Romania, on the other hand, remains one of the countries where the phenomenon is not well-researched yet. While PB is still actively being used around the country, it remains a novelty, which is awarded very little attention from researchers in the country. Romania is rarely considered a possible case study for PB, even if there are multiple examples of cities that use different variants of this mechanism. This gap in the literature is not only important for researchers and policymakers who focus on Romania, but it also marks a blind spot for the international literature, as the Romanian experience could be an important example for several countries that may be pursuing PB programs, especially for countries in Eastern and Central Europe due to the shared similarities in this region.

The role of this paper is to create an overall picture of the implementation of participatory budgeting programs in Romania by analysing eleven cities where the local administrations have tried such mechanisms. The results of this paper will not only help fill in the gap of knowledge around this topic in the Romanian context, but will also contribute to the international literature and research regarding PB, deliberative democracy, and new democratic tools. Of key importance in

this regard, a general understanding of the outcomes of putting PB programs into practice could also prove useful to Romanian local authorities that are actively using or planning to experiment with PB.

## Literature Review

Participatory Budgeting can be generally understood as a deliberative democratic process that directly involves non-elected citizens in the policy-making process of local governments (Godwin 2018; De Sousa Santos 1998, 468), specifically concerning the management of public finances (Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke 2000, 168). The local authorities allocate part of the city's budget towards expenses determined through the deliberation of the citizens. These citizens can propose, discuss, and vote on what projects they would like to see implemented in their communities. It is thus both a mechanism for increasing civic engagement and local administration efficiency (Godwin 2018; Wampler 2000). Nonetheless, when it comes to political participation, countries seem to struggle to engage the population even if accommodating conditions exist, such as free and fair elections or freedom of peaceful assembly and proper political representation (Parvin 2018). This can be seen through low voter turn-out in elections or lack of civic movements, all of which are a result of low trust in authorities and governance (Parvin 2018), among other causes. This low rate of participation seems to also carry over to PB projects.

Participatory Budgeting projects are becoming increasingly popular in cities across the world, however, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to how these projects should be established or carried out. Despite the existence of certain tendencies and patterns in the organization and implementation of PB projects, local governments have the freedom to mould the process to suit their specific needs and circumstances. This flexibility afforded to local governments allows them to shape the process in a way that best suits their community and circumstances, leading to a diverse range of approaches and methods being used in the implementation of participatory budgeting projects around the world.

Starting in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil as a tool provided by the local administration to give the citizens direct access to the local budget in order to directly address the effects of the poverty the country was facing at that time, with over 50% of the population living under poverty by the beginning of 1990 (according to data from the World Bank, 1995), the system came to be known as Participatory Budgeting (De Sousa Santos 1998). After its initial success in Brazil, PB has rapidly become a worldwide phenomenon, undergoing various adaptations from country to country, reaching every continent. Lisbon has adopted an online version of PB which in turn has influenced other countries on the continent to do the same (Dias 2018). Relevant to our study, the Portuguese example had a direct influence on the approach to PB in Cluj-Napoca, which in turn influenced other cities in Romania to do the same (Boc 2019). Yet, as we will see in the analysis, the Romanian municipalities have adopted systems that make their PB vary slightly from their initial model.

The policy changes that are being brought about by Participatory Budgeting stem from its core principles and objectives, which include enhancing transparency, establishing the legitimacy of decisions made by local governments, promoting equitable distribution of resources, and reducing social disparities within communities (Baiocchi & Ganuza 2014). Despite the potential benefits that PB projects can bring to the communities in which they are implemented, several challenges can hinder their success. For example, the lack of clearly established channels of communication between stakeholders, a lack of interest or involvement from local authorities, slow or lacklustre results, and insufficient funding can all contribute to the failure of PB projects to actively engage citizens and produce meaningful outcomes (Wampler 2000; Karp & Milazzo 2015). These issues can negatively impact the overall success of PB projects and limit their ability to deliver on their core goals and objectives. It is important to be aware of these challenges when implementing Participatory Budgeting projects in order to develop effective strategies to address them and ensure their success. By understanding the potential roadblocks and developing solutions to overcome them, communities can increase their chances of success and realize the full benefits of PB. At the same time, when we look at the

examples where participatory budgeting has had a more significant impact, these show that the involvement of non-governmental organizations in participatory-type policies can often lead to better results. An interesting area where these types of policies have shown promise is in the Middle East, where they have helped improve basic infrastructure in places like Baghdad and Lebanon, from ensuring access to clean water and electricity to offering social help and reducing illiteracy within vulnerable communities. (Wampler 2000; Shah 2007; Dyck 2009; Fournier et al. 2011).

In the Eastern European region, Romania is one of the countries that have witnessed some expansion of participatory budgeting initiatives, but the effectiveness of these projects and the capability of local authorities to meaningfully involve citizens in the decision-making process, as well as delivering on projects that have a significant impact on the community, remains difficult to determine at this time (Costea & Ilucă 2021). Assessing the success of participatory budgeting projects can be challenging, as it involves evaluating the level of engagement from local authorities and citizens, as well as the impact of the projects on the community as a whole. It is important for local authorities and communities to continually evaluate the performance of participatory budgeting projects and work towards enhancing their efficiency and impact. By doing so, they can ensure that these projects are delivering meaningful outcomes for the community and creating a more democratic and equitable system of local governance.

Seeing how PB programs have registered successes in a wide range of countries, varying both in levels of development as well as in political institutions, there is no reason to expect it could not yield similar results for Romanian cities. We will therefore focus on these attempts that have been made in recent years to implement PB programs and see how they have been developing and how they compare to cases found in the literature.

## Methodology

All Romanian cities with active participatory budgeting initiatives in 2021 were selected for the analysis: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Braşov,

Sibiu, Târgoviște, Târgu Mureș, Turda, Deva, Făgăraș, Târgu Secuiesc, and Alba Iulia. The number of completed PB stages varies from 1 to 4 between the listed cities.

A descriptive analysis was conducted in order to see the similarities and differences between the implementation of PB programs in the 11 cities, with a focus on the following areas: budgeting, voting systems, platforms to access the PB process, and project categories for funding. The goals here are to see the level of resources each city dedicates to PB, how they communicate with citizens and how they allow them to participate, and what are the parameters each PB program sets to limit or guide the decision-making process, in order to understand how each element contributes to the success of PB, or hinders this success.

A database has been constructed using information from the official participatory budgeting websites of the eleven cities, it contains all relevant and publicly available information regarding each individual project proposed through the PB mechanism. It displays the total number of the PB sessions according to their cities and years, data regarding each individual project that has been proposed according to their category, eligibility, proposed sum, funding status, phase status and the number of votes (when applicable). The data, along with other information reading rules, voting mechanisms, or PB budgets were collected using each city's official Participatory Budgeting platform, during March 2022 – June 2022.

### **Data analysis**

The first Participatory Budgeting experiment in Romania was conducted in Cluj-Napoca in 2013, as a pilot project restricted to one of its administrative regions, Cluj-Mănăstur. In 2015, a similar youth-oriented Participatory Budgeting project was also conducted. The first Participatory Budgeting project on a city-wide scale was conducted online in 2017 also in Cluj-Napoca (Dohotaru 2022). As of 2019, 15 local governments adopted participatory budgeting (Dias, Enríquez & Júlio 2019).

Table 1

**Romanian cities that have at least 1 participatory budgeting edition until 2022**

No.	City	Year of 1 <sup>st</sup> edition	No. of completed PB stages
1	București	2021	1
2	Cluj-Napoca	2017	4
3	Brașov	2021	1
4	Sibiu	2018	2
5	Târgu Mureș	2022	1
6	Târgoviște	2019	1
7	Alba Iulia	2020	2
8	Deva	2019	2
9	Turda	2019	1
10	Făgăraș	2019	3
11	Târgu Secuiesc	2020	1

Source: compiled by the authors

Table 1 offers us an overview of the size of the individual cities by showing an overview of the longevity of PB by displaying the year of the first edition and the number of completed PB editions (as of June 2022). We can observe that PB is relatively new in Romania, as most of the cities have adopted such programs between 2019 and 2021. Cluj-Napoca had the first PB session in 2017. Târgu Mureș is the latest city to adopt PB in 2022. We can also observe that out of our case studies, only 5 of the 11 municipalities have at least two completed PB editions. It can be observed that out of the 11 cities, 8 of them, including Bucharest, serve as county capitals, which suggests that the financial stability of these cities plays an important role in the decision made by public authorities to embrace PB as a practice.

## Budget

The budget for PB projects in Eastern and Central European countries varies significantly, both in absolute and relative terms. In Poland, one of the first countries in this region to adopt PB, the budget is different from city to city. Sopot, the first Polish city to have PB started in 2012 with a budget of 1.2 million EUR (1.5 % of the total town budget) and reached 1.4 million EUR

(2.2 % of the total town budget) in 2015. In Gdansk, the PB budget represented 2.1 million EUR, 0.3% of the total city budget, being raised to 2.6 million EUR (0.4%) the next year. In Siemianowice Slaskie, a relatively smaller city, the PB budget in 2014 was 118,346 EUR (0.4% from the general budget) and rose to 473,384 EUR in 2015, 0.7% from the city's general budget. In Croatia, the city of Rijeka had, in 2015, a PB budget of approximately 40.000 EUR, making up 0.4% of the overall municipal budget. (Dzinic, Svidronova & Markowska-Bzducha 2016).

Table 2

## General budget and Participatory Budgeting budget by cities

No.	City	Latest Completed Edition by 2021	PB Budget latest edition	PB budget from general budget (%)
1	Cluj-Napoca	2021	11,077,415 RON (2,250,000 EUR)	0.52
2	Deva	2020	500,000 RON (100,000 EUR)	0.27
3	Sibiu	2019	7,378,484 RON] (1,500,000 EUR)	1.78
4	Alba Iulia	2021	1,000,000 RON (205,000 EUR)	0.29
5	Făgăraș	2021	500,000 RON (102.000 EUR)	0.17
6	Brașov	2021	2,000,000 RON (245,000 EUR)	0.19
7	Târgu Mureș	2021	3,000,000 RON (613.000 EUR)	0.61
8	Târgu Secuiesc	2022	100,000 RON (20,445 EUR)	0.11
9	Turda	2019	1,000,000 RON (205,000 EUR)	0.35
10	Târgoviște	2019	1,200,000 RON (245,000 EUR)	0.4
11	București	2021	2,000,000 RON (409,000 EUR)	0.02

Source: compiled by the authors



Shifting our focus to other examples in Europe, in Portugal (a source of inspiration for Romanian PB programs), the city of Cascais offered a budget of 2.2 million EUR (4.4% of the municipal investments) to be allocated through PB by the citizens. In Odemira the PB budget was 5 million EUR, 2.6 % of the city budget (Alves & Allegretti 2012). In 2011, Lisbon provided 5 million EUR in funds for its PB project (1.1% of the total city budget), this budget being reduced to 2.5 million EUR in 2012. More recently, Lisbon has doubled the PB budget from 2019 to 2020, reaching 5 million EUR (City Finance Lab 2022).

In contrast to other examples we have considered, the levels of investment in Romanian PB initiatives have been minuscule compared to their respective local budgets, with only Sibiu exceeding 1% of the municipal budget, which is at the lower end for PB initiatives in all other countries we have looked at, although somewhat consistent with other CEE countries (e.g. Poland). Moreover, in terms of absolute numbers, only 3 cities (Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, and Târgu Mureș) have budgets exceeding 500.000 EUR, limiting how ambitious the goals of PB projects can be.

### **Participatory budgeting implementation: voting system, platforms, and categories**

The implementation of participatory budgeting in each local administration will usually distinguish itself from other procedures in other cities or countries, and thus it can be used to partly explain the variation in the success or failure of a particular PB program in meeting its goals. In the following section, the specifics of the voting system, the platforms utilized, and the categories that citizens are allowed to cast their votes on will be detailed and explained. The transparency of the system will be determined by analysing the platform of the participatory budgeting mechanism in each city and the facilities that these platforms offer to citizens (whether they display details such as votes, the reasons for which projects have been declined, feedback from the local commissions regarding the implementation of projects after they have been selected for financing, the level of detail in the project descriptions, etc.).

### *Voting platforms: accessibility & transparency*

When analysing the type of platform that the cities use, we can observe that 9 out of 11 cities use the same type of platform. This type is first used by Cluj-Napoca, which gives us a hint about the influence that the adoption of participatory budgeting in this city has had around the country. (For the rest of the paper this platform will be referred to as the “Cluj-Napoca platform”). București, Brasov and Alba Iulia use their own platforms. Transparency seems to be a typically overlooked characteristic. The websites and platforms employed for participatory budgeting do not offer information on relevant aspects such as project implementation details and plans, results of the implementations, spending, or reasons for implementation setbacks. To take the case of Cluj-Napoca, the PB platform lacks a range of information from explanations regarding why projects are rejected at the level of technical analysis (which could invoke the question of the authorities’ impartiality), to data about the actual implementation of projects and the detailed budget for each project. The problem of transparency then connects to that of the legitimacy of the projects, which erodes public trust in the entire process and can sabotage PB initiatives. Lastly, in almost all cases the deliberative process is done online, as well as the proposing and voting of projects in all cities, with small exceptions like Târgoviște and Făgăraș, where there is a combination of online voting and offline public debate. However, even these small outliers do not yield exceptional results, as these debates only occur at the voting stage, after the projects have already been chosen.

### *Voting System*

The voting system is essential in assessing the efficiency of the participatory budgeting project in a city. By identifying and analysing what type of voting system is used in each city in relation to the rest of the data, we can determine (and explain) what participatory budgeting mechanisms are more efficient. From the total of 11 cities analyzed, only two of them have integrated an offline voting system and deliberation tools. As the digitalization of public participation is increasing with time, several authors

have argued that, in the case of participatory budgeting, it could widen the gap between urban and rural populations or between vulnerable groups and the more well-off (Nilsson & Carlsson 2014; Vorderer et al. 2017). The reason for choosing an online model seems to be that the PB system in Cluj-Napoca, which acted as an example for the rest of the cities in Romania, was inspired by the Portuguese model, adopting a strictly online mechanism.

Table 3

## Voting system procedure, by city

City	Voting system
Cluj-Napoca	In the first stage, each citizen can vote for a project per category.
	In the second stage, each citizen can vote once for the preferred project.
	In the 2021 edition, voting has been reduced to one stage as only 20 projects have passed the technical analysis stage (instead of the usual 30).
Braşov	The citizens can vote for one project per category; the winning projects are selected based on the number of votes no matter the category.
Alba Iulia	The citizens can vote for one project per category, and the first project in each category wins.
Făgăraş	The citizens can vote for one project per category; the winning projects are selected on the number of votes no matter the category. The offline meetings are only deliberative and do not affect voting.
Bucureşti	The citizens vote for one project only no matter the category, the projects win based on the number of votes no matter the category.
Târgu Secuiesc	Each citizen can vote 4 times for any 4 different projects they prefer.
Deva	Each citizen can vote for one project per category. The first project in each category is selected. In case the budget is not expended after there is a winner in each category, the next projects based on the number of votes (not on category) are selected until the budget limit is reached.
Târgu Mureş	In the first stage, each citizen can vote for a project per category.
	In the second stage, each citizen can vote once for the preferred project.
Sibiu	In the first stage, each citizen can vote for a project per category.
	In the second stage, each citizen can vote once for the preferred project.
Turda	The citizens can vote for one project per category, and the first project in each category wins.
Târgovişte	Târgovişte has a voting system that combines online with offline. Deliberation does not occur at the start and selection of the projects but at the final voting stage. The first 5 projects based on their votes will be put to a public offline debate and voted on again in this form. The winning projects are determined by combining 50% of the votes in the digital form and 50% in the public vote.

Source: compiled by the authors

### *Categories*

When looking at the different voting systems for PB initiatives in Romanian cities, a recurring theme has been the importance of the project categories, as they are often used to limit how many projects can be funded for particular areas of interest (e.g. PB in Alba Iulia, Deva and Turda aim to fund at least a project from each category), as well as to potentially ensure that as many types issues as possible are addressed, with several cities implementing voting based on the category in the first round followed by generic votes in the second. The issue here is the potential limits placed on how the local electorate decides to spend the PB section of the budget as voters may focus on a narrower range of topics that they perceive as being priorities. The categories in all the cities mostly refer to the same areas as in the Cluj-Napoca platform: green spaces, educational infrastructure, digital city, etc. Not all municipalities separate or name them in the same way, as some of them might have more categories or even fewer, but generally, they cover the same areas of interest as in Cluj-Napoca.

According to our database of PB projects in Romania, the most voted group of categories in all the case studies is the Educational Infrastructure one. By tallying all the votes based on category across all the completed years of participatory budgeting in all cities, we can see that a total number of 18,037 final votes have been given to the Educational Infrastructure group of categories, which make up about 29% of the total number of final votes for all category groups (62,392). Yet it should be noted that most of the votes are from Cluj-Napoca's first edition, where the three top-voted projects that year gathered a total of 7,077 votes. Projects that can generally be categorized in the "green spaces" group are also among the most voted: 16,656 out of 62,392 (26.7%) in all 11 cities. This seems to be a pattern not only in Romania but also in Eastern and Central Europe (Dzinic et al. 2016).

The least voted category in Romanian cities overall is the one regarding the digitalization of the city. Not all the cities have a digital category, but among the 6 cities that do (Cluj-Napoca, Alba Iulia, Sibiu, Făgăraș, Deva, and Târgu Mureș), only 3034 of the final votes were aimed at a "Digital" project, making up only 7% out of the total number

of final votes (42859) in these 6 cities, which continues the pattern seen early on in Cluj-Napoca.

*Table 4*

**Top 20 most voted PB-financed projects in Romania based on their category groups and proposed budget**

City	Year	Category	Proposed Sum	Number of votes
Cluj-Napoca	2017	Educational and cultural infrastructure	–	2,809
Alba Iulia	2021	Education and Culture	250,000	2,424
Cluj-Napoca	2017	Educational and cultural infrastructure	–	2,392
Alba Iulia	2021	Tourism	431,400	2,317
Alba Iulia	2021	Green Spaces	192,755	2,166
Turda	2019	Other areas of interest to citizens	192,000	1,937
Cluj-Napoca	2017	Educational and cultural infrastructure	–	1,876
Alba Iulia	2021	Sports and health	500,000	1,601
Turda	2019	Green spaces, playgrounds, and other public spaces arranged	152,300	1,544
Alba Iulia	2021	Sports and health	75,824	1,185
București	2021	Landscaping and playgrounds	500,000	1,167
București	2021	Landscaping and playgrounds	497,109	1,164
Alba Iulia	2021	Environment	220,000	1,156
București	2021	Mobility, accessibility, and traffic safety	500,000	1,145
București	2021	Environmental / animal protection	500,000	1,117
Turda	2019	Educational and cultural infrastructure	70,000	1,113
București	2021	Mobility, accessibility, and traffic safety	500,000	1,056
Turda	2019	Green spaces, playgrounds, and other public spaces arranged	21,880	959
Cluj-Napoca	2018	Arrangement of public spaces (street furniture, street lighting, etc.)	–	884
Turda	2019	Green spaces, playgrounds, and other public spaces arranged	87,000	873

*Source:* compiled by the authors

Surprisingly enough, Cluj-Napoca has the fewest projects in the top 20 voted out of the 4 cities which dominate this list, despite having the longest-running PB program and the second largest population size of our sample of cities. Other than 4 projects from Cluj-Napoca (3 of which are the Educational Infrastructure), all the rest are from other municipalities. Alba-Iulia is the city with the most voted projects, having 6 projects in

the first 20, Turda following with 5, then București with the same number. The fact that Cluj-Napoca has so few projects on top compared with the rest of the cities, and especially seeing how all of them from the first two editions, indicates again that its PB initiative has not had a positive evolution.

### First to second edition efficiency comparison

In order to analyse the evolution of the PB initiatives in the different cities, we will compare the efficiency they've had in mobilizing public interest between the first and second editions, seeing as how only 2 cities have more than 2 editions. This comparison consists in analysing the difference in the total number of proposed projects and the total number of votes allocated between the first year and second year (editions) of participatory budgeting in the following municipalities: Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Deva, and Făgăraș. These are the cities that have at least 2 completed participatory budgeting editions.

Table 5

**Projects and final votes organized on cities  
and their two first editions of participatory budgeting**

City	Population (thousands)	1 <sup>st</sup> edition	2 <sup>nd</sup> edition projects	% Change in number of projects in relation to 1 <sup>st</sup> edition	1 <sup>st</sup> edition	2 <sup>nd</sup> edition	% Change in the number of votes compared with the 1 <sup>st</sup> edition
		projects			final votes	final votes	
Cluj-Napoca	309	338	164	-41%	9,919	3,460	-65%
Sibiu	147	153	141	-8%	7,87	478	-39%
Alba Iulia	63	32	51	59%	1,827	9,542	118%
Deva	61	23	34	48%	498	313	-36%
Făgăraș	28	39	39	0%	1,974	3,989	102%

Source: compiled by the authors

Out of the 5 cities, Cluj-Napoca has seen the biggest drop both in projects (– 41%) and in total final votes (–65%). At the first edition in 2017, Cluj-Napoca reached 10,510 total final votes, with a considerable drop in the second edition in 2018 where the number of total final votes is 3,713, and in the latest completed edition, in 2021, the final count reached 3,828 votes. The other case studies are also not particularly encouraging, with the exception of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș, with the number of final votes being low even from the first editions and only going further down.

Alba Iulia is the city with the most positive evolution. Its population is much smaller than the one of Cluj-Napoca, and the percentage of the budget allocated to participatory budgeting is almost half that of Cluj-Napoca. The increase in the number of projects across the two years is + 48% and the number of votes has more than doubled (+ 118%). However, Alba Iulia allows multiple votes per person in one round of voting, which makes it difficult to understand how many individual persons have voted. The most voted project in Alba-Iulia reached 2,424 votes in the education and culture category. The next two most popular projects also reach over 2000 votes and are both from separate categories. In 2021, Alba Iulia had 6 projects that had reached over 1000 votes. Yet, as Dohotaru (2022) points out, Alba Iulia does not impose any filters for the persons voting. Anyone can vote from anywhere, as no system asks for a personal identification number or other personal information that could identify them as living in the city. This not only allows people from other cities to vote, but it allows for voting from multiple accounts, making the process easy to trick. Dohotaru (2022) also identifies another problem related to the online version of PB. He argues that it allows specific interest groups to use it as a means to propose and then vote on their own projects, as in the case of schools in Alba Iulia, where students were encouraged to make accounts and vote for specific projects proposed by the schools. There is also no offline public deliberation, as is the case with the other cities, even if it had been promised by different city councils.

In terms of the number of projects, Deva is the only other city that has seen an increase, with 48% more proposals between the 2019 and 2020 editions. However, the overall interest of the population seems to have gone down, with a 36% decrease in votes over the same period

(from around 0.81% of the population voting to 0.51. It is also interesting to note that both Deva and Alba Iulia, the two cities which experienced an increase in the number of projects applying for funding, implement a system that allocates funding for at least one project in each category. This would suggest that such a system encourages more people to submit projects for funding, as these projects would only compete with similar ideas.

In terms of final votes, the participatory budgeting project in Făgăraș has seen a double of final votes from 2019 to 2020 (+ 102%), the only other positive evolution after Alba-Iulia. The number of projects has stagnated over the first two years, with the third year seeing a slight decrease both in projects and final votes.

## Conclusions and discussion

PB is still a relatively new system in Romania, with only 5 out of the 11 cities having completed more than one PB edition (Cluj-Napoca having 4, followed by Făgăraș with 3. Sibiu, Alba Iulia, and Deva all have 2 completed editions). In terms of consistency, except for Deva and Sibiu, these also seem to be the cities in which the local authorities seem to have committed to a yearly PB initiative. In the analysis of the progress from the first to second edition of these 5 cities, we determined that the trend in proposed projects and votes is of overall descent or stagnation. This might explain why only 3 cities have decided to continue with their PB initiatives. Alba Iulia has seen a positive change both in the number of votes and projects proposed, yet it is difficult to determine how many of those votes are from individual citizens who live in the city, and how much is vote inflation from interest groups who can mobilize people to vote multiple times. This prevents us from reaching any conclusion regarding a possible correlation between Alba Iulia's method of funding projects from all categories recognized for PB is in any way effective in mobilizing interest for citizen participation in the process, especially considering that the only other city with a similar system (Deva) seems to be experiencing declining voter interest.



Cluj-Napoca is the city with the steepest descent both in projects and final votes, which continues as a trend onto its next two editions. The year with the most PB initiatives started is 2019 when 4 of the cities in our list had their first edition, but only one of those cities, Făgăraș, has continued practicing it. In the following time period (2020-2021), another 4 cities adopted PB, however, only one (Alba Iulia) is still committed to following up with more editions.

The online method of PB without public deliberation seems to be the most popular in Romania. Only Făgăraș and Târgoviște organize offline meetings for the citizens. Similarly, most of the cities also prefer only one voting stage, which could be explained by the overall small population or small voting presence, as in the case of Cluj-Napoca where in its latest edition the local authorities have decided to reduce the number of stages to one. In terms of budget, all of the examples present low sums dedicated to the projects. Only three cities reach 0.50% of the local budget, Cluj-Napoca, Târgu Mureș, and Sibiu, the latter being the only one with a PB budget of over 1% of the general budget. In general, taking into consideration all 11 cities, PB is not an overall successful method in Romania. The system is either abandoned after the first edition, or it struggles to maintain a positive trend in the number of votes and proposed projects.

Moreover, because the participatory budgeting systems are designed to work online through the platforms offered by the city, only those who have access to the internet, and furthermore know how to navigate the platform can propose and vote on projects. This, of course, is only if they even know of the existence of such a platform in the first place. This is a major disadvantage to poorer areas of the cities where these conditions are not present. More than that, according to Eurostat, in 2021 Romania occupied the last place in Europe when it came to basic digital competency of people, with only 28% of citizens aged between 16 and 74 possessing at least basic overall digital skills (Eurostat 2022), limiting potential voting access to this kind of online PB platforms. This is likely one of the major factors contributing to the low levels of engagement that PB programs have managed to maintain, however, it is not enough to explain the declining interest across the years for programs already put in place.

Returning to the issue of budgeting, in 2021, Cluj-Napoca offers the most funding for projects, with a maximum sum of 150.000 EUR per project for each of the 15 winning projects, followed by Sibiu which offers a maximum of 150.000 EUR for 10 winning projects. When it comes to the other cities, the sums get even lower, to the point where they are arguably insignificant. In Deva, the local government offers 50.000 RON for each project, approximately 10.000 EUR. If we take a look at, for example, the winning projects in Deva in 2020, we can determine the actual scale and impact of them: The top project, with 65 votes, entitled "Secure bike racks in residential neighbourhoods" proposes instalment of bicycle racks in residential areas. The PB site doesn't offer pictures or other evidence of the finalization of the project, not even after 2 years, thus the impact of the project is hard to determine due to the lack of transparency. Nonetheless, the dimension of the project is still small even if it may be helpful for the citizens that bike in Deva. The second most voted project with 62 votes, entitled "Smart pole Wi-Fi with solar energy – Deva smart city" proposes the installation of a Wi-Fi hotspot pole with a range of 185 meters in the city's main park. The website doesn't offer evidence of whether the pole has been installed, yet, even if the Wi-Fi hotspot is helpful for the people that use the park, it does not have a major impact on the public of the city. The problem with the budget is the amount offered for each individual project. The sums are not enough to make significant changes or to implement projects that could have a significant impact on problems that a city might be facing.

PB programs in Romania are still in their infancy, which makes future tracking of these attempts crucial to make more thorough and effective proposals for improvement. However, based on the limited sample we have to work with, the results do not seem to be encouraging. It does not seem that PB attempts will see greater success without more resources dedicated both to promoting these programs and to funding projects through them, in order to garner more interest in the future. The issue of accessing PB mechanisms that are exclusively digital is another hurdle to their success, although we recognize that in larger cities other forms of public consultations may be more difficult and costly to organize. However, there is room for improvement even with the digital platforms, with both issues of transparency to fix, as

well as the possibility of allowing for more discussion and public feedback within the digital platforms themselves, to give citizens the ability to express themselves beyond merely casting a vote. Lastly, it would be an improvement to the current situation if local authorities were more consistent in organizing PB programs, as without predictable calendars and visible dedication from authorities there is little chance of integrating PB into local civic life. As the literature on the subject has shown, PB has some track record of success around the world, but this success cannot be replicated in Romania with half-hearted attempts that are abandoned when not met with immediate public enthusiasm.

While PB initiatives have shown some promise around the world, both in empowering citizens, increasing public accountability, and promoting local improvements in social welfare and quality of life, the Romanian test cases we have so far are not very encouraging. They suffer both from underfunding and lack of interest, both from the citizens (who may not have heard of them, to begin with), as well as from the authorities, who often give up on the initiatives after their first attempts. Coupled with the fact that many projects which are implemented seem to be low-impact, modest improvements to the local communities, with significant transparency issues, these PB mechanisms seem to have little hope of drawing more public interest. Given the cases we have analysed and contrasting them to other initiatives worldwide, it seems that PB risks becoming more of a symbolic measure to signal the democratic bona fides of local authorities, rather than an instrument for democratic participation.

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