

Local governance and Participatory Democracy. Experiments of digital participatory budgeting in Romania.

Abstract

Initially developed in Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting is defined as a democratic exercise where citizens decide on the local budget's spending priorities. It has spread at a steady pace across European cities. Still, the local authorities have not resumed a mimetic implementation of the Brazilian model but have adapted it according to their institutional traditions. There is a rich experience in enforcing various models, from offline, hybrid, or online practices. These mechanisms have involved the participation of citizens, experts, or private actors, as partners of the local authorities, according to the models embraced by the local government authorities.

With this aim in mind, this paper looks at the case of E-PB, digital participatory budgeting, an innovative instrument of citizen empowerment, and its implementation at the local level in Romania. Why Romania? Although there is a rich literature on participatory budgeting initiatives, the case of Central and Eastern Europe does not benefit from a balanced coverage in the academic literature, even if in the last years, as more and more local authorities in Poland, Czech Republic, or elsewhere have implemented PB projects, several scholarly articles have mapped this new empirical reality. When it comes to Romania, the situation is far from being similar, as post-communist democratization took a rather slow pace, and the existence of a strong civil society equipped with the task to exert pressure on the local authorities to change their policies towards more accountable behavior and increased citizen participation has failed to take place.

As PB represents a novelty in Romania cities' urban governance practices, this paper attempts to fill this gap and shed light on the state of local democracy. This paper aims to answer the question related to the factors that influence the success of E-PB participatory initiatives. Drawing on the model developed by Styliani Zafeiropoulou, Sven A. Carlsson, and Annika Andersson, this paper will test the three categories of factors (people factors, local authorities factors and technology factors) which determine the success of such innovative democratic models and which have been implemented across Europe, in the last twenty years.