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Participation as experiential factor
in democratic emancipation
Case of Cluj Napoca, Romania

Uczestnictwo jako czynnik wyjaśniający
demokratyczną emancypację
Przypadek Cluj Napoca w Rumunii

STRESZCZENIE: W artykule ukazano, w jaki sposób procesy partycypacyjne (w tym przypadku budżetowanie partycypacyjne) wpływają na motywacje i zwyczaje aktywnego obywatelskiego zaangażowania w społeczeństwie o dużym dystansie do władzy i wysokich wynikach unikania i niepewności. Wyniki pokazują, że prawie wszyscy respondenci zgłaszali zdobycie nowych umiejętności i wiedzy, jak również zwiększone upodmiotowienie (*empowerment*). Jego przejawy dotyczyły zarówno dalszego zaangażowania wspólnotowego, jak i większego poczucia prawa do monitorowania władz publicznych i pociągania ich do odpowiedzialności.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Budżetowanie partycypacyjne; uczenie się przez uczestnictwo; upodmiotowienie poprzez uczestnictwo; skuteczna demokracja; jakość demokracji; wartości kulturowe; wymiary kulturowe.

ABSTRACT: The study explores how participatory processes (in this case, participatory budgeting) impact people's motivation for and the habit of active civic engagement in a society with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance scores. The findings show that almost all respondents reported the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, as well as an increased expression of empowerment. The manifestations of empowerment varied from further community activism, to increased feeling of entitlement to monitor public authorities and hold them accountable.

KEYWORDS: Participatory budgeting; learning through participation; empowerment through participation; effective democracy; quality of democracy; cultural values; cultural dimensions.

Introduction:
culture, democracy and a participatory budgeting process

As a former communist country, Romania is trying to re-connect with her democratic past after a 45-year break, and is searching ways to increase the quality and effectiveness of its democratic system. The post-communist, "transition"[1] society has to deal with the legacy of its recent as well as ancient history, which has shaped its core cultural values and socio-political behaviors, resulting in a society with a high power distance (PDI) and high uncertainty avoidance (UAI) indexes, as these cultural dimensions are defined by Hofstede et al. (2010). Romania's PDI is 90 on a 11 – 104 scale, and UAI is 90 on an 8 – 112 scale. Countries with high PDI and high UAI usually see a larger gap between citizens and public decision makers; less enforcement of the law and more differentiated treatment of people under the same law; a higher level of corruption among public servants, with less accountability; a deeper lack of citizen involvement in civic activities, as citizens are perceived as incompetent in their relation to authorities, and protests are seen as undesirable and likely to be repressed; low levels of voter turn-out in the elections, as citizens are not interested in politics and have negative perceptions of politicians, civil servants, and the legal system (Hofstede et al., 2010). These cultural traits impact a state's ability to ensure the enforcement of the rule of law, as well as citizens' power to control and motivation to engage with authority, elements considered essential for the quality and effectiveness of a democracy (Morlino 2004; Diamond, Morlino 2005; Inglehart, Welzel 2007; Bühlmann, Merkel, Wessels 2008; Morlino 2009; Alexander, Welzel 2011; Morlino 2011; Logan, Mattes 2012; Pickel, Breustedt, Smolka 2016).

Therefore, the implementation of a participatory budgeting process in such a high PDI, high UAI context appeared as a great opportunity to explore the impact of active civic engagement on the participants, as democracy learning by doing (Schugurensky 2006; Daly, Schugurensky, Lopes 2009), and the perceived potential of such learning to empower lay citizens, whether in their relationship with the local government, or in (re)connecting with their com-

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[1] "Transition" (or "society in transition") is a generally-accepted term in Romania, used by scholars and lay people alike, to define the democratic, social and economic realities of the country. It shows that Romanians acknowledge and understand the "under construction" status of their democracy.

munity and taking "ownership" of their future (Serrat et al. 2016; Allegretti, Corsi, Allegretti 2016; Serrat et al. 2017).

Cluj-Napoca is located in the NW of Romania, and is country's second largest city, with a population of about 400,000 inhabitants. According to the Romanian National Institute for Statistics (2017), about 46% of people living in Cluj have graduated from a higher education institution. According to Numbeo's Quality of Life index (2017), Cluj-Napoca is placed in European top 20, before Brussels, Milan, Barcelona, London or Paris.

Mănăștur is the largest district of Cluj-Napoca, with over 100,000 inhabitants. For the most part, it was built in the 1970s and 1980s, when the communist industrialization of the city was based on the construction of dormitory-like districts with high density population. Among these districts, Mănăștur has the highest population density (over 4,200 inhabitants/km^2) and very diverse needs (from children playgrounds to elderly social assistance, from schools to transportation, from parking spaces to recreation areas, from reducing pollution to public safety), facing numerous issues regarding the quality of life. These issues needed to be prioritized for intervention. The City Hall of Cluj-Napoca decided to open up to the public and give them a say in deciding what were the district's priorities for improving community's quality of life. The instrument chosen for this was participatory budgeting, which gave people the chance to participate firsthand in a decision-making process directed towards public spending.

As stated by the city's local government (City Hall and City Council), the expected main goal of the Participatory Budgeting initiative in Cluj-Napoca was to develop and strengthen participatory local governance by empowering local community, while increasing decisional transparency and making more sustainable public decisions (Cluj-Napoca City Hall, 2017). The process was designed and implemented between January and December 2013, and included budget priorities for Mănăștur for 2014 and 2015. As the implementation of the projects spanned from a few weeks to a few years, it was seen as an ongoing process, until the implementation was complete (January 2016). Over 700 people were directly involved in the process, their contribution generated 61 projects (3 large scale, 1 medium, and 57 small scale), for the implementation of which over 4.3 mil. Euros ($4.8 mil.) were allocated, which represented 3.64% of the city's annual Budget for Development for 2014 (Cluj-Napoca City Hall, 2017). Also, the PB process set the trend for a number of other participatory initiatives, among which the Youth PB Project seems to be the most long-lasting.

Research method and instruments

A qualitative research method was employed in order to explore how participatory processes (in this case participatory budgeting) impact people's motivation for the habit of active civic engagement (Alexander, Welzel 2011) in high PDI and high UAI contexts.

Semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire for acquiring socio-demographic data (gender, age, level of education, years in the community, occupation) on the sample, as well as field observations were combined in this exploratory qualitative study. The qualitative method was preferred for two main reasons (Shank 2006; Tewksbury 2009): (a) the necessary data for the study was nominal data; (b) the qualitative approach allowed for more comprehensive metadata gathering (insights on interviewee's reactions, attitude and change in perceptions, etc.), thus ensuring a wider and deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The interview included 6 main questions:
— Do you feel that this was a regular process of local government outreach or was it different? How was it different?
— Did you enjoy this experience? (Why/why not)
— How was this experience useful (a) for your community and (b) for the local government (elected officials / public servants)?
— What are the personal benefits someone gains from such an experience?
— Should this be repeated? (Why/why not)
— Would you participate again in similar processes? (Why/why not)

The use of a semi-structured interview tool allowed the researcher to further explore certain themes and gather more data, especially as the participants had very diverse backgrounds and professions (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill 2007). From the 28 participants, 25 agreed to be interviewed via telephone calls, while 3 interviewees preferred the face-to-face discussions. Each interview was conducted in one, uninterrupted session and was recorded using digital equipment and/or dedicated software applications.

Secondary data sources were used for gathering information on the cultural context of the society, the level and quality of democracy in Romania, as well as for understanding the very specific economic and educational environments of the city of Cluj-Napoca. Thus, for the cultural values and context on Romania, data from Hofstede's national cultural dimensions (2010) and Inglehart & Welzel's World Values Survey (2017) was used. For offering

a better picture of the local economic and educational specificities of Cluj, data from the Romanian National Institute for Statistics and Numbeo's Quality of Life index was used.

Sampling of participants

Convenience sampling was used to select the interviewees and included persons who participated in at least four of the five public workshops/events of the participatory budgeting process. Out of 43 persons contacted, 28 agreed to participate in the study. The mean age of the participants was 52 (ranging from 28 to 79, with a standard deviation of 14.6), similar with the estimated mean age of the participants in the PB process which was around 54. From the sample, 32% were women and 68% men, 28% had some type of higher education, 28% secondary, while 35% some type of post-secondary education. Almost 65% of the interviewees had been part of the community for over 30 years, while only two had been living there for 5 years or less.

Data analysis

The recordings of all 28 interviews were transcribed and then the answers to all questions were analyzed in terms of learning outcomes. The analysis employed a multiple-step procedure aimed to identify themes related to possible outcomes of learning. The process started by listening to all recordings then thoroughly read all answers in order to get a general picture of the data and to be able to comprehend what the participants expressed or conveyed as being their main learning results (Maxwell 2013). The next step was to identify and code the themes resulted from associating ideas with related meaning from all respondents. Then, a new combing of the texts and recordings generated a final pair of key components associated with the learning outcomes: new skills and, respectively new knowledge acquired. Also, empowerment of individuals and groups was expressed as a learning outcome in relation to both newly acquired skills and knowledge.

Some limitations and possible sources of error need to be mentioned. First, this study was socio-demographically restricted to the city of Cluj-Napoca. Due to certain historic, cultural and economic contextual particularities of this area, the results could be extrapolated to Romania only within certain limits. Also, self-reporting on situations and perceptions from before the participatory process asked respondents to think about personal changes in a retrospective manner, which may have altered some of their real initial in-

sights. Another source of error, inherent to such type of qualitative research is the relative bias generated by the sample of respondents who were selected from the pool of PB participants who provided their contact data to the organizers, and who later also agreed to be interviewed.

Findings

Analysis of raw data resulted from the interviews reveled numerous mentions to learning situations and outcomes, pertaining to two main areas: acquiring new skills and gaining new knowledge (Table 1). The data analysis also revealed that these two outcomes of participants' learning experience during the PB process were perceived as drivers for a third outcome: empowerment of individuals and, also, empowerment of groups. Whether in their relationship with the local government or within the community, respondents described a change in their perceived role as citizens: upon acquiring new skills, gaining new knowledge and directly participating in the decision-making process, side by side with public servants and elected officials, they felt empowered to take action and to speak up (both as individuals and as representatives of their communities), as well as to hold the public servants / elected officials accountable for their actions / non-actions. As a group, they felt more entitled to challenge authority legitimacy on decisions where they felt their community was disregarded, and more autonomous, willing to take "ownership" of their community in solving problems and caring for each other.

Table 1. Learning outcomes for participants

New skills acquired	New knowledge gained
Facilitating group discussions / debates	How public administration works (procedures/processes/departments/issues)
Drafting proposals for budgeting / petitions	
Evaluating proposals	How participatory budgeting works (and what participatory governance is)
Active listening, collaborating, negotiating	
Public speaking	Legislation related to local government activity
Argumentation and debate	The state of their community (environment, people, activities) and community needs
Networking	

Acquirement of new skills

The first component reflects one of the main reported outcomes of the formal and informal learning process that respondents have been part of, during the PB in Cluj-Napoca: gaining new skills that proved useful in their relation with the community and with the local government. From the thoughts shared by interviewees one of the most important skills mentioned as

being gained was the facilitation and mediation of group debates. As one of the interviewees explained "first, I thought it was very difficult to deal with 10 people discussing and defending their own 2–3 ideas, but now, that I have learned some special [facilitation] techniques and tricks, it doesn't seem so far-fetched any more" (i04M).

Another major sub-component of this area is learning how to draft a proposal for budgeting and how to evaluate it. Many respondents mentioned this as a significant acquirement, because before that, they were reluctant to discuss about financing and public money because they were unaware of the structure and functioning of a public budget. However, upon acquiring this new skill, some seemed ready to participate in technical debates about budgeting and felt entitled to hold the public servants / experts accountable for their jobs and results – "now I can follow [City Hall experts'] proposals and tell them what I think is wrong or needs to be improved. It wouldn't be easy to fool me now" (i20F).

Group working based on active listening, collaboration and negotiation were also among the new skills mentioned by the participants, who also explained how they acquired those skills during the process, by actively participating in the debates. One of the participants pointed out that "at first, it seemed that everybody was only interested in their own ideas and problems, but then we got to listen to each other and work together" (i10M), while other showed that "some wanted more parking lots, others needed their alleys repaired, or pre-K, or more recreational areas, but money's limited – we needed to discuss all issues and found some common ground, eventually" (i06M).

A significant number of participants (9) mentioned an initial reluctance or unease to express their ideas in front of the others, because they were not used to speaking in public – "I was quite embarrassed when I had to speak for the first time in front of all those people, and of the mayor", confessed a respondent (i11M) and others confirmed "speaking to so many unfamiliar people – that was difficult" (i05F), "[people from] my generation were not used to hold speeches (i25M)". At the same time, several others understood the importance of supporting ideas with sound argumentation, thus proving the acquirement of a certain level of debate skills. For example one of the respondents noted "you need to show why your idea is better, not just throw it there and expect everybody to support it"(i21F), while another appeared unhappy as "some people only spoke to get attention, they did not have any solid base for what they said"(i18M).

Gaining of new knowledge

The second component identified in the analysis of the dataset is related to the specialized information the participants gained during their activities in the PB process. The first sub-component of this area focuses on knowledge about how local public administration works and the specificities and difficulties of a public servant's work. As both during the formative sessions for community facilitators and during the PB meetings, participants worked and discussed with many public employees from the City Hall, they had the opportunity to learn about how the local government works, about the specific processes, as well as about the issues and challenges encountered by public administrators. Referring to this, some respondents expressed their sympathy for the public employees: "things are not easy for them [public employees] either, with so many issues and so little money" (i28F), "many don't really know how hard it is [for City Hall] to implement citizens' ideas" (i20F), while others were positive about their interaction with the local government representatives: "it's good that we have communicated directly [with the local government]" (i06M), "we need to do this more often – it would make their job so much easier"(i17M). In the same context, most interviewees expressed either their initial surprise or their appreciation for the decision of the City Hall to open up to the citizens and ask for their input – not an expected behavior from government officials, in their opinion. For exemplification, here are some of the comments: "It really surprised me [the PB initiative], and I was quite skeptical at first" (i23F), "it was great to see the community getting together" (i12F), "here [in Romania] you don't usually expect too much from politicians or from bureaucrats, but because I trusted the mayor, I joined the meetings and it was good" (i01M), "this was a first for Romania, I think – they need to do this in all districts. I am sure it would pay off, the city will be much better off (i24M)".

Several participants made some genuine comments regarding public participation in general which they saw as either more complicated than expected or quite hard to manage, while others qualified it as quite complex and time-consuming. All these observations demonstrate significant first hand insight and understanding on the intricacy of such processes (Panebianco & Pahl-Wostl, 2004). "I thought it would be easy, but it took me a while to figure out [the rules and procedures]" (i14M); "by the end, I came to really appreciate the efforts put in by the coordinators and facilitators and by the mayor – it was not an easy job for them" (i18M); "so many people there, so many issues on the table, quite complicated" (i21F); "one thing I did not li-

ke was that maybe some discussion were way too long, but at the end of the day it was all worth it" (i08M).

Another important sub-component of the knowledge learning outcome appeared to be the increased awareness and comprehension of the participants on certain pieces of legislation associated with the local government activity and responsibilities. As one participant explained: "there are too many laws and by-laws and they keep changing them – but now I know where to look and how to 'read' them" (i22M), while others expressed similar ideas – "I am glad I got some clarifications on the legislation" (i02F); "[public employees] are very sensitive when it comes to legislation – you'd better do your homework in law if you want something done" (i09F); "apparently it's easier [for public servants] to say to people 'No, can't do, the law doesn't allow' when common people have no idea about legislation – these meetings helped me understand how to write more effective petitions" (i11M). The importance of this finding is explained in more detail in the discussion section.

Increased empowerment

Both learning results, with their sub-components, were most of the time associated with expressions of empowerment. Thus, the data analysis revealed two types of perceived empowerment: (i) by learning and (ii) by learning & doing (Table 2). This finding is also consistent with the strong determination expressed by all interviewees to participate in any future collaborative processes of similar kind. Even more, the majority of them offered to also participate in the organization of such events, in the future.

Table 2. Reported types of empowerment

Empowered by learning ("now, I know") = educated community member	Empowered by learning & doing ("now, I want") = community activist
Informed and meaningful participation, when invited Equal entitlement to participation for women More difficult to deceive and manipulate Able to evaluate efficiency and legitimacy of authority and power	Petitioning Networking Engaging in community (helping the needy) Participating in decision-making Holding public servants accountable Taking "ownership" of their community, looking out for the community Voluntary community work

The analysis of the interviews showed that respondents who were involved for the first time in this type of collaborative process with the local government felt that such processes were able to "elevate" lay citizens at the perceived "higher level" of public authorities (empowerment by learning). Also,

many respondents showed that they continued their voluntary activity within their community in one way or another, feeling empowered by doing: "I am taking action every day, now" (i12F) one of the participants underscored, while another exemplified an increased community autonomy: "We found housing for a family in need" (i02F).

Adversative associations of empowerment with expressions of high power distance

Among the characteristics of high power distance societies described by Hofstede et al. (2010), there are, for example, the shared assumptions that the powerful are entitled to privileges, that inequalities among people are a (desirable) fact of life and the less powerful people are dependent, and that it is normal to have less dialogue and more authoritarian conduct in politics. These assumptions were also expressed by the respondents as perceived high power distance instances in the society, but the respondents also reported a change in the perception of their own status in relationship to authority and power, after the engagement process: "you know, common citizens are small to important people [at the city hall & in the city council], […] but we, too, should be asked about city's needs, maybe we are even more qualified to answer that" (i06M); "you know what they say, some make the rules and some have to follow the rules, but, actually, now [after gaining knowledge] I say that if we were to still keep this position [i.e. less powerful should be dependent and submissive], why did we even bother to change the regime?" (i15F); "usually, who would ask common people like us what we think? Well, they should. Like in this process. It was a good process"; "They [people in authority positions] can no longer not care what common people think. We are the ones who put them there [in positions of authority]".

Adversative associations of empowerment with expressions of high uncertainty avoidance

As described by Hofstede at al. (2010), inclination for civic engagement and community activism can be directly correlated with a society's score on uncertainty avoidance. Among some of the traits exhibited by high UAI cultures in this respect are the belief that citizens are incompetent in their interaction with and evaluation of authorities, and are not interested in politics, because they see politicians, civil servants, and the legal system in a negative light. Such beliefs generate distrust and increase the gap between citizens and the local government, on one hand, and a reduced engagement in voluntary associations and movements. While these traits were shown in respondents' answers, the research findings also show that those expressions were usually adversatively correlated with the expressions of empowerment, such as: "Com-

mon people don't always know how to talk, but now I am entitled to speak up my mind" (i17M); "not everybody knows how to read the law, but now, I think we proved worthy for the time they [public servants and elected officials] spent discussing with us" (i27M); "maybe I was not truly knowledgeable, but I've learned a lot and I'm glad I was able to give them [public servants and elected officials] good advice" (i22M).

Discussion

The study explores how participatory processes might impact people's motivation for and the habit of active civic engagement (Alexander, Welzel 2011) in a society with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance scores (Hofstede et al. 2010).

The findings resulted from the analysis of the qualitative dataset gathered from 28 interviews with participants in a participatory budgeting process in Romania showed that respondents recalled their experience in terms of significant learning outcomes, mainly related to acquiring new skills and knowledge. Also, the learning experience generated a secondary outcome for participants – empowerment, articulated in direct relationship with the outcomes of the learning process. Reporting on empowerment as a motivator and generator of democratic practices aligns with the results of Schugurensky (2006), Talpin (2007), Daly, Schugurensky, Lopes (2009), Russon-Gilman (2016), and Allegretti et al. (2016), which also describe direct engagement in participatory processes as a process of democratic learning.

Incorporating a wide range of manifestations, from informed citizenship, to community activism, to further engaging in holding authorities accountable, empowerment was adversatively associated by respondents with expressions of high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. While there were still some respondents feeling that this process was driven by the presence of a generous "important" person who had decided to share power with common people, and common people should show gratitude (traits of high PDI cultures), all respondents were decisively building their argument that sharing power is normal, beneficial to the whole community (including common people, public servants and elected officials), should be done on regular basis and extended, as legitimacy of decision power was perceived as laying with the common citizens. Also, beside reducing the gap between local government and citizens, the knowledge and skills acquired during the participatory process appeared to have provided more self-confidence for the participants in their relationship with the local public administration, doubled by a sense of pride for their perceived new role within the community.

Conclusion

High PDI, high UAI contexts are rarely conducive of fervent civic engagement or high quality, effective democracies, if at all (Hofstede et al. 2010; Alexander, Welzel 2011; Welzel, Inglehart 2016). Even when general conditions change, like they did in Romania, in 1989, with the fall of communism, the cultural values in place perpetuated, generating a democracy more formal than effective, a "transition" society struggling to increase its democratic quality.

Among different approaches to this problem, a city in Romania tried participatory budgeting. This study explored what people could learn from engaging in public participation processes and, secondly, how these learning outcomes could impact individuals' motivation for civic engagement and for a further, more consistent practice of it (Schugurensky 2006; Alexander, Welzel 2011), in a society with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance scores, based on the cultural dimension index developed by Hofstede et al. (2010).

The findings resulted showed that almost all respondents reported the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, as well as an increased expression of empowerment. The manifestations of empowerment varied from a more informed citizen, to a more active behavior within one's community, to increased feelings of entitlement to speak up, and to monitor public authorities (public servants / elected officials) and hold them accountable.

For the local government, the input received through the PB process allowed a more citizen-oriented prioritization of needs and the proposal of solutions based on consensus building. The consensus building approach fostered more interaction between citizens and the representatives of the public administration, and also increased the input from minority and marginalized groups. The consensus building framework encouraged the participants to identify for themselves the areas in most need of intervention, as well as the types/groups/categories of citizens most in need of help within their neighborhoods, and to commonly propose solutions to their problems, while every participant's input was recorded as equally important and legitimate when the community priorities were set (e.g. – increased public transportation facilities, the creation of a cultural and leisure center with free access for community members, especially low-income families with kids, free training and job counseling services for the unemployed, several small playgrounds and parks for young families with children, several small outdoor sports areas for the teenagers and young people, increased level of public safety, improvement of

sanitation services etc.). Both the decisional environment and the process, based on consensus-building, were conducive of a learning experience that nurtured participants' self-confidence and empowerment and a perception of increased community self-reliance.

In a country still on the developing path towards effective democracy, these findings show that the use of specific participatory instruments explicitly targeted at reducing both power distance and certain aspects of UAI related to civic engagement and activism, might prove beneficial in terms of learning democracy by doing (Daly, Schugurensky, Lopes 2009) and impacting participant's cultural values through an empowering and emancipating firsthand experience, (Welzel, Inglehart 2016).

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