

# Implementing Open Government At The Local Level In Romania Case Study: The Municipality Of Braşov

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** With an emphasis on the use of digital platforms to advance open governance, this study attempts to assess how well Braşov City Hall's efforts in 2020–2024 foster two-way contact with the public. **Method:** The online resources used by Braşov City Hall were examined using a thorough case study methodology, which evaluated the openness of its public statements and the degree to which these tools support collaborative governance. **Results:** Citizens report unsolved issues and communication delays, showing deficiencies in two-way participation, and the findings show major gaps in responsiveness and openness. **Novelty:** By offering a thorough case study on Braşov's open government initiatives, this study adds to the body of material already in existence. It highlights how crucial it is to not just use digital tools but also make sure that public input successfully results in significant governance reforms. By emphasizing these factors, this study emphasizes how important it is for local governments to improve effective and transparent citizen participation in order to foster true collaborative governance and foster public trust.

## INTRODUCTION

The term open government is defined in theory as a group of factors that aim to facilitate citizens' participation in public decision-making. To talk about open government, the institutions must collaborate with citizens and ensure transparency both in public decision-making and in everything related to administration. One of the important elements that brought the idea of open government to the fore is the advent of the Internet [1]. In 2024 state institutions can communicate with the citizens from wherever they are, they can find out in a timely manner the wishes and needs of the community, thus contributing to a quick resolution of the situations that arise. But this aspect is not only about the availability of online tools, but also about the openness of citizens and institutions to use them. The local administration must stimulate the citizens and this can be achieved not only by listening to them, but also by concrete actions that demonstrate that their needs can be fulfilled. For this collaboration to work, the involvement of both local administration and civil society is necessary [2, p. 15].

The hypothesis of this research is that "to be able to transform the current government into an open government, online tools are necessary, but not sufficient: the town hall must involve citizens in decision-making, not just hear their opinion".

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research employs a case study methodology to analyze the online tools utilized by Braşov City Hall to facilitate communication and implement open governance between 2020 and 2024. This approach involves examining the various digital platforms available to citizens, assessing the responses to their petitions, and evaluating the transparency of the local administration's online interactions. The analysis focuses on the effectiveness of these tools in fostering two-way communication and collaborative governance. Additionally, it incorporates qualitative assessments of citizen feedback and documented cases of interactions between citizens and the municipality, drawing conclusions on the overall efficacy of Braşov City Hall's open government initiatives.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Online tools used by Brasov City Hall to implement open governance**

In the framework of this article, I will carry out an analysis of the online tools made available to citizens by the Brasov City Hall in order to facilitate communication with them and to transform local government into an open government. The analysis will be carried out for the period 2020 – 2024. The main research method will be a case study, analyzing the online tools made available to citizens by the local administration, the answers provided to petitions addressed by citizens and the transparency of Braşov City Hall in the online environment.

To be able to talk about a collaboration between state institutions and citizens, we must first talk about transparency and communication methods between the two parties. On the Brasov City Hall website you can find all the information provided by law: organization of the institution, public tenders, public procurement contracts, forms and many other information related to transparency [3]. This demonstrates the fact that the basis for future collaboration exists, with the town hall providing citizens with all the information about the institution. Also, the methods of communication with the institution are varied, citizens can request information directly at the headquarters, by phone or using the online environment. Among the methods of communication in the online environment are private messages from social networks [4] and e-mail addresses available for all departments [3, p. Contact]. I thus note that there are a variety of contact methods that citizens can use, the town hall offering the possibility of maintaining contact both with people who do not have access to the Internet or do not know how to use it, as well as with people who prefer quick communication through online tools, without having to go to the headquarters. By thus creating a way of communication with the citizens, I can say that Brasov City Hall has succeeded in laying the foundations for future collaboration.

Among the online services offered to citizens by Brasov City Hall, we have identified: an electronic services portal [3, p. Portal servicii electronice], a platform through which you can interact with the city hall [3, p. Interacţionează cu Primăria] and a mobile application where complaints can be sent [5]. The latter are not just a simple method of communication but aim to achieve the transition to a collaborative governance.

Within the My BrasovCity mobile application, online payments can be made and reports can be submitted [5] and there is also a button that allows the user to be redirected to the requests web page. Submitted reports are moved to resolved reports when the institution resolves the situation reported by citizens. However, I cannot confirm whether the reports are resolved or not, as there is no option for the institution's solutions or answers to be public. Even though on the web page of the Brasov City Hall we have identified a map with the reports entered by users and the registration number received for each one, the only method through which I can observe the level of involvement of the institution in solving the situations introduced by citizens is to analyze the comments from application download page. Some of the citizens claim that their reports were resolved, submitting several reports over time, but there are also users who state that they were moved to the resolved section, without any real intervention [6]. In order for this process to be transparent and to give citizens the certainty that their reports are listened to, and the institution takes measures in this regard, a method must be identified through which both the reports and the responses received to be visible to all users. The currently available application can be improved in this regard or it can be changed with a new application that allows the publication of notices and responses provided by the town hall. An example of this can be found in the case of Oradea City Hall, which through the City Report application [7] makes available to all citizens the petitions received, their resolution status and possible responses. The transparency of petitions is important in transforming the current government into an open government, thereby encouraging citizens to get involved and giving them the certainty that their wishes and needs are being listened by the institution. Even if Brasov City Hall has managed to implement the necessary tools for open governance, it is only half done without a concrete action made by the institution.

The reason why Brasov City Hall wanted these reports not to be published cannot be related to the fact that they would have received anonymous reports. To access the My BraşovCity application, it is necessary to create an account with all identification data, so that people who decide to interact with the institution in this way cannot transmit anonymously. This fact limits the receiving erroneous or malicious information, which is why the transparency of notifications received, accompanied by the institution's responses, would be beneficial for a collaborative relationship between the town hall and citizens.

Another online tool available to citizens is the platform through which Brasov residents can interact with the town hall [3, p. Interacţionează cu Primăria]. Within this platform, we have found online services available on topics through which citizens can find out information of public interest, submit online requests or submit petitions. As I mentioned previously, we have identified within the platform an interactive map of the municipality where all the petitions entered, from all fields, are displayed (Appendix 1). Each petition has a title and a subtitle (example: Sanitation Incident – Sanitation Service

Complaints), the street where the problem was reported, the description entered by the petitioner, the date the situation was transmitted and a registration number. Even if we have not identified the answer given by the authorities or the stage of resolution, we can find both in the press and in the Facebook groups intended for the residents of the Municipality of Brasov references to the notifications sent, but also an answer provided by the institution to a citizen. We also identified a ratio of the number of referrals reported, the number of referrals closed and the number of referrals opened. This graphic report is available monthly from July 2020 to July 2021 [3, p. Situația sesizărilor primite în Dispeceratul Integrat al Primăriei]. The absence of this report for the period 2021 – 2024 demonstrates the lack of involvement of the authorities in the transparency of the communication process, a fact that would have helped to stimulate citizens to get involved in the act of local governance.

Returning to the references identified in the online environment regarding these notifications received by Brasov City Hall, we learn from the press that 13,765 reports were received throughout the year 2023, half of which were communicated by telephone [8]. However, I have not identified in the press any reference to the status of these reports if they have received answers from the institution. The only thing we can be concluded is that the citizens got involved in quite a large number in the year 2023, which proves that the civil society is ready for the transformation of the local government into an open government. On the other hand, on the part of the local administration, we can identify only half-taken actions, which would be making available to citizens the tools that can facilitate the collaborative relationship. Brasov City Hall must act in order to resolve the situations submitted by citizens and must prove its involvement in order to be able to truly talk about an open government.

Within social networks, on a group intended for residents of the Municipality of Brasov, I found a response received by a citizen to a notification sent on the platform, this being one of the few proofs of the response provided by the institution (Appendix 2). The response received came at a difference of almost nine months from the notification sent, a long period considering that the notification referred to the sanitation on the public domain. Also, the representatives of the institution specified that the notification was sent to the department dealing with this aspect, without providing an answer, and if the citizen believes that the situation has not yet been resolved, he can send a new notification. This response proves that the institution is not fully prepared to collaborate with citizens, and in terms of communication, we can hardly talk about a two-way communication, the answers coming after months of waiting. However, it must be remembered that this is the only proof of communication identified by me, for the other referrals, the institution's responses are not public. However, from the download page of the My BrasovCity application we can see that other users have also encountered the situation described in the answer given by the representative of the institution, the reports being passed as solved without providing an answer or proof that they were solved [5]. Through these evidences, Brasov City Hall demonstrates that it does not get

involved enough in solving citizens' reports, is not having a two-way communication and it is a proof of the fact that the institution is not open to a collaborate with the citizens.

Another tool available for citizens in the online environment is *Vocea Cartierului* [9] through which citizens can submit proposals for the neighborhood they belong to. This function is a completely online tool starting from the moment the new mayor takes office. In the old administration, the mayor had meetings with the citizens in the neighborhoods where their proposals were discussed, but there was no concrete report to demonstrate that the administration was acting according to the wishes and needs of the citizens. Starting from the end of October 2024, this functionality is completely transferred to the online environment, without removing the proposals of people who do not have access to the Internet or do not know how to use it. Proposals and reports can be submitted both online and physically, being taken over by the Community Relations and Innovation Department. Then, the mayor of the Brasov Municipality will respond to the main proposals and notifications submitted by citizens, every Thursday, on his official Facebook page. This demonstrates that the local administration will carry out a two-way communication with citizens and provide solutions or explanations to submitted petitions. This functionality cannot be analyzed because, at the time of writing, the mandate of the new mayor is just beginning. Also, checking the official page of the former mayor I was unable to identify answers given online to citizens regarding the petitions introduced for their neighborhood.

Another functionality identified in the online environment that demonstrates a collaboration between citizens and the local administration, is represented by the public consultation for the realization of the General Urban Planning of the Municipality of Brasov [10]. On the consultation page, I have identified the entire documentation that can be analyzed by citizens, but also an announcement that these can also be consulted physically, at the institution's headquarters. Also, proposals can be submitted both online and physically, which ensures access to this consultation for all citizens. On the consultation page, I found an announcement rescheduling the public debate to clarify some aspects and to integrate some of the citizens' proposals, which proves that there is a two-way communication in this case and that the institution takes into account the citizens' proposals. These aspects demonstrate the application of open government in the true sense.

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding** : This study shows that although the Municipality of Braşov's potential for open government is greatly increased by the use of digital tools, these tools must be used in conjunction with sincere attempts to involve the public in the decision-making process. **Implication** : In order to promote a culture of trust and cooperation that is necessary for efficient government, public institutions must actively recognize and respond to citizen feedback in addition to facilitating communication. **Limitation** : This

study's focus on a particular town, however, limits its ability to adequately represent the nuances and differences found in different areas or situations. **Future Research** : Thus, additional research ought to investigate the effects of comparable programs in various towns, looking at the disparities in citizen participation and the efficiency of various communication tactics in fostering transparent governance.

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