

## **Unpacking Local Council Meetings: a Sociolinguistic Approach and Its Lessons for Participatory Democracy\***

**Abstract:** This article is an investigation into the conditions of possibility and the practice of participatory democracy in the context of local council meetings in Romania. I discuss local council meetings as scripted social actions that are highly ritualized. My fieldwork observations have showed that within the social frame of local council meetings, the actually-existing citizen's voice is quite rarely heard. In my account of this lack, I argue that the rather utopic model of participatory democracy implies a working model of social and personal governance, based on trust and self-trust, both of which require time to be built and fostered. Learning how to trust oneself and how to trust others, acquiring knowledge and practical wisdom, as well as building communities of democratic practice can occur naturally, within the community, but higher education institutions can play a formative role as well.

**Key words:** participatory democracy, city council meetings, governance, trust, education.

### **1. Introduction**

The fall of communism in 1989 stands out as the turning point in recent European history, and as a major event in world politics. In the aftermath of the events that swept one communist government after another in Eastern and Central Europe, democracy in the image of the West and the free market seemed the natural and unquestionable path to follow in the shaping of new nations and of their new political, social and economic structures. In the early 1990s, democracy rang as a promise and a cherished dream, one that had been worth fighting for and dying for. In the long process of transition, democracy took various overtones, determined by local geo-political, economical and cultural legacies, and that have made it gain particular features in each country where it was adopted as a political regime.

If, twenty years ago, democracy was mainly understood as representative democracy, nowadays, it has been suggested that this form of

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government should be paralleled by the so-called participatory democracy. The latter acts at local, grass-roots level and implies participation of citizens in decision-making process that ultimately affect their life. Thus, by engaging in the collective discursive formulation of a problem, by finding collectively-approved solutions to it, and having them turned into legally binding decisions that are applied in practice, members of local communities actively participate in the constant strengthening and refashioning of the social structure to which they belong, and govern themselves directly, at local level. This move from central government to self-governance is proposed to counter the negative sides of big government, state interventionism and control. It is also hoped that it will cure citizens of political apathy, which can be best seen by the low citizen turnout for elections and referendums, and is meant to empower citizens to take responsibility for their collective welfare, security and happiness. In addition, it aims to make better use of local public resources, in ways that respond to local needs and capitalize on local knowledge and wisdom.

Participatory democracy has been proposed and promoted as a tool for self-government at European level. National citizens are encouraged to take part not only in local decision-making, in their regions and communities, but they can address issues of relevance for the whole Union, and propose law drafts within the framework of the first transnational instrument for participatory democracy, i.e. the programme called European Citizens' Initiative. This project is the first attempt to act on the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty at European level, and not at the level at individual member states. So far, what has been accomplished was the creation of a "Green Paper" which translated the Treaty's imperative for participatory democracy into possible directions that can be followed in the implementation of the Treaty. The possible options were explained and grounded in national practice in the Member States, and citizens have been consulted via a questionnaire as to how the Citizens' Initiative should be implemented in terms of how to ensure representativeness of the initiative (how many countries, what percentage of their population, how to check validity of signatures and how to collect signatures, etc).

In my opinion, that the success of this transnational participatory project depends on how well participatory democracy works at local level. This is why, in this article investigate participatory democracy at local level, on the fringes of Europe, in urban and rural locations in Eastern Romania. The aim of the investigation is to identify what local practices teach about the potential and limits of participatory democracy, its conditions of possibility and ways to optimize its functioning. By expecting to identify ways to optimize the functioning of democracy, I do not mean to imply that I started my research from a biased presumption of malfunctioning democratic practices. I suggest optimization because I believe that no matter how well a system or an instrument functions, it needs to be checked, evaluated and constantly adjusted to the changes in the context in which it is used.

## 2. Research Data and Methodology

This article takes an interdisciplinary perspective to two issues that have gained topical interest in recent years, namely participatory democracy and self-governance at community level. The research findings presented here are based on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2010 both online and *in situ*, in rural and urban locations in North Eastern and South Eastern Romania. The tools and methods that I have used to gather my data are online ethnography of videos of local council meetings that are posted on city-hall websites (Vaslui), participant observation in local council meetings, the sociolinguistic analysis of the transcript of an audio-recorded meeting, unstructured interviews with local council secretaries, mayors, vice mayors, members of local councils, city hall officers in charge with communication with citizens, or with educational and cultural issues. I attended local council meetings in rural areas around Iasi (Movileni and Birnova), and I conducted interviews in one rural area in Vaslui (Valeni) and in the local council in Braila. I have also collected local council documents, such as calls for meetings, meeting agendas and minutes, local regulations for the functioning of the local council, and the documentation that backs draft directives submitted to be approved by the council.

Since my training is not in political science, public administration, or political communication, I found it relevant to research the term “democracy” in terms of its emergence, terminological trajectories, avatars and counter-arguments to it. I was interested in what participatory democracy implies and what it can achieve, namely self-governing communities. A short discussion of participatory democracy is presented below, as a way of framing my topic.

I use my notes from the meetings that I have watched online or that I have attended and from the interviews that I have conducted in order to assess the degree to which my intellectual understanding of participatory democracy matches the way in which it is lived “in the field.” I then dwell on the audio recording as a socio-linguist, who is interested in local council meetings as a discursive event. In my approach, I discuss local council meetings as scripted social actions that are highly ritualized. I rely on the theoretical apparatus developed by Ervin Goffmann to analyze conversation and on John L. Austin’s speech act theory. Drawing on the results of my ethnographic and socio-linguistic analysis, I make a few suggestions for the optimisation of participatory democracy in Romania.

## 3. Participatory Democracy: Theoretical Perspectives

### (a) Forms of democracy

There are, in any language, certain words that seem to have a halo around them and that stand out as the name for something that is worth fighting for. Words like “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*” – the slogan of the French

Revolution – *homeland, or motherland, family, community, peace, love, social security, etc...* have captured attention and mobilized the masses. Democracy, I would argue, is equally charged with the power to make people invest their beliefs, passions and emotions in it.

Part of the Hellenic conceptual legacy, democracy meant – in its etymologic understanding – the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*). One thing is worth mentioning here: during the epoch when the term was coined, the “people” was a selective club, which excluded slaves and women.

Therefore, originally, the meaning of the term was more restricted than the way in which we conceptualize it today.

Classical literature on democracy distinguishes between *direct democracy* and *representative democracy*. The former implies that the power of the people is exercised unequivocally and without mediation. In the latter, the people exercise their power through elected representatives. The “people,” i.e. the persons who are entitled to vote, elect officials and delegate their decisional powers to them. The elected candidates are expected to act on behalf of the interests of the persons who gave them their vote and protect them from social and political risks. Once a representative takes office, it is he or she that takes part in the decision making process and in the passing of laws, and not the persons who elected them.

Participatory democracy, on the other hand, allows all willing citizens to take part in decision making. Jean Leon Beauvois argues that there are at least two acceptations of the phrase “participatory democracy” and, implicitly, two sites where it can be located. First, it can be seen at work in companies, hospitals, schools, etc, where it enables people to participate in the exercise of power that regulates their social existence in their interaction with the power apparatus (Beauvois, 2006 : 13)<sup>1</sup>. This type of democracy fuses together political democracy and social democracy. In its second acceptation, it posits itself in counterpoint to the technocracy and bureaucracy of state power. It aims to bring the process of decision making to the lowest possible level, where decisions have to be applied. In order for this type of democracy to be functional, it becomes imperative to define the territorial units within which citizens can grasp the link between the decisions that they can make, as a collective, and their actual consequences (Beauvois, 2006 : 13). In other words, what Beauvois argues is that participatory democracy, in its latter acceptation, acts at the local level of government, where the size of the local is defined by the type of decision to be made and the reach of its impact.

Underlying the promotion of participatory democracy is the belief that participatory democracy can magically solve various problems that sociologists have identified as plaguing contemporary society. Anthony Giddens (1996)

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<sup>1</sup> In Bouvois' words, “La démocratie participative aurait alors pour fonction de faire en sorte que les gens participent à l'exercice du pouvoir qui règle leur existence sociale dans la quotidienneté des rapports sociaux et des relations qu'ils ont avec les appareils du pouvoir. “

writes about the consequences of modernity in terms of discontinuity and proliferation of risks. Ulrich Beck (1992) also analyses the “risk society” and the crisis of institutional legitimatisation that discourses of risk has engendered. Both diagnose a lack of trust of the common person in the institutions of modernity which, in politics, translates into citizen apathy, disengagement from party politics, low voting turnouts, political inactivity.

Political apathy signals incomplete democracy. In an historical perspective, however, the unfinished and unfinalizable character of democracy has not always been an issue to require remedial intervention. In the realist school of Schumpeter and his followers – the so-called “democratic elitist school” (Bachrach, 1967), citizen catallaxy is a prerequisite for functional democracy: citizens are simply expected to vote, and remain rather inactive, politically, until they can exercise their civic right to vote during the next elections.

### **(b) Participatory democracy: origin of the term and context of its emergence**

The term “participatory democracy” – redundant, as it may seem, since democracy, arguably, in its etymological understanding implies participation, is usually attributed to Arnold Kaufman. Kaufman was a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan and University of California at Los Angeles and played a major role writing the *Port Huron Statement*, which was released in June 1962 as the manifesto of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). This statement gave voice to the students' acute and radical disenchantment with the American society of the times, maimed by “racial bigotry in South” and the “paranoid logic of Cold War” (Lacey, 2008 : 3). After the publication of McCarthy's list of person suspected to collaborate with the communists, a which-hunt for undercover communists in the army, in the federal government, among intellectuals, etc. caught the American public under the sway of irrational political passions and unfounded allegations. In that particular historical context, the principles of democracy, liberty and equality rang increasingly hollow to students' ears. The statement incriminated the political complacency of increasingly prosperous Americans, and expressed concern with the lack of popular control over constitutional issues (<http://www.h-net.org/~hst306/documents/huron.html>). In addition, students were criticizing the neo-Schumpeterian, anti-participatory views of their professors (Lacey, 2008 : 123), thus asking for the opening up of higher education institutions to enhanced democratic practices.

The solution that Students for a Democratic Society suggested was participatory democracy, a revolutionized form of a democratic political regime that would allow individuals to take part in decision-making processes and have a say in social, political and administrative measures which can bear directly on the quality and direction of their life. As a solution to increased social anomy,

participatory democracy was also credited to have the potential to foster an “acceptable pattern of social relations” and draw “people out of isolation and into community,” and thus find meaning in life (<http://www.h-net.org/~hst306/documents/huron.html>).

Social groupings were posited as the arena where the best decisions could be made in the interest of all and where one could develop one's full potential as a human being by dynamic social learning, outside institutions. Underlying the SDS commitment to participatory democracy was a belief in the perfectibility of the human nature and confidence in the virtues of learning by doing. In other words, the Port Huron manifesto was based on an intuitively experiential pedagogy, in the vein of Kolb's theory of education.

### (c) American and European lineages of participation in politics

In these educational underpinnings, participatory democracy reveals its linkage with the philosophy of John Dewey and the tradition of American pragmatic philosophy. Dewey stood out as a public intellectual who professed his firm belief in democracy in his multi-disciplinary writings as well as in his daily life as a professor and as a citizen. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) he argued that the attainment of the American political dream – democracy and freedom for all members of the nation – depends on the general spread of democratic participation as a way of life for all citizens (Lacey, 2008 : 17). In his system of political and educational philosophy, democracy encapsulates an ethical ideal in which each individual is granted the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential for self-governance and his ability to work with his fellows and create a community based on reciprocity and mutual respect (Lacey, 2008 : 17). Within the community, the individual, who is envisioned as socially determined and constructed, can rise morally and intellectually as high as his or her circumstances allow.

On the other hand, Dewey hails participatory democracy as an ideal way of life and the best context in which social truths can be formulated and negotiated, through verbal interaction. It is believed to promote the common good, empower the individual and yield an “improved humanity” (Lacey, 2008 : 17). This optimism for participatory democracy as an instrument to promote the common good and transform the individual rests on several mutually dependent pragmatic tenets:

- *Democratic epistemology*: truth is not an essentialist *apriori* to be uncovered in investigation or in revelation but a social construct. “Men arrive at truth socially, deliberately, and experientially, and the more people involved in this rather unruly and messy process, the closer they get to truth. .... we must attain truth inductively, sampling a large number of specific experiences from which we can infer generalizable truths, which then serve the interests of the entire collective“ (*apud* Lacey, 2008 : 18).

• *Democratic psychology*: humans themselves are the result of social construction; one's personality is fashioned by social contacts and interaction, and nothing is transcendently stable or fixed (fated) in human development. What seems to constitute human nature, or a law of humanity, is mere habit and therefore can be changed. The ultimate value of humanity is the "unlimited potential" and the capacity for "love, empathy, and moral strength." Humans are not fatally flawed, as Protestant religion has it, but need only proper education to fulfil their capacity for action and bring to fruition their potential. In this context, the best form of democracy must create opportunities for group-based, interactive education (Lacey, 2008 : 18).

These two premises lead to the conclusion that participatory democracy is the logical form of governance. However, Dewey's system is not fully straightforward: a third tenet argues that people have free will and thus face no serious obstacles, either overt or subtle, that prevent them from devoting considerable time and energy to politics. The postulation of an a-priori free-will clashes, however, with the constructiveness of democratic psychology (Lacey, 2008 : 18).

In another lineage of the intellectual history of the concept "participatory democracy", the roots of the philosophy of participation are traced down to Jean Jacques Rousseau and his *The Social Contract* (published in 1762). A civic republican by political orientation, Rousseau countered in his writings the views of liberal theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Thomas Hobbes (1651) gave a psychological and pragmatic interpretation to the emergence of sovereign authority and individual submission to it: in a natural state, self-interested individuals are driven by fear to submit to sovereign authority in exchange for security. Thus, in order to feel secure, one must submit, i.e. sacrifice his or her freedom. Unlike Hobbes, John Locke (1689) saw humans as governed by reason and tolerance. In his account of the emergence of civil society, reasonable choice dictates individuals with the natural right to defend their property to form a civil society where conflicts can be solved in a reasonable way.

Rousseau attempted to reconcile freedom and submission by suggesting, in his idea of the social contract, a form of social association that allows individuals to remain free. By submitting all their powers to everybody else, individuals commonly generate a "public person" endowed with "general will" – the embodiment of a moral imperative for people to promote common interests. In seeking common good, individuals are bound to each other and free, at the same time, because they have willingly created the imperative to act in this way.

This theory was meant to be put into practice in small city states, like the ones in Rousseau's native Switzerland, by legislatures made up of all or the majority of inhabitants who meet periodically and express, through the majority vote, the general will. The model was successful, if we consider the model of Swiss direct democracy at local, canton and national level, set as early as 1291 (the founding of the Old Swiss Confederacy) and still in force even today. In this

political model, citizens are consulted via referendums and decisions are made on the basis of their direct votes.

#### **(d) Alternative terms and counter-arguments**

Ideas of participatory democracy have been reworked and re-thought in ways that have created a series of terminological avatars. One of the most frequently used ones is deliberative democracy (sometimes also called discursive democracy). The terms was fathered by Joseph M. Bessette in *Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government* (1980), and conceptually refined by Bessette himself in *The Mild Voice of Reason* (1994), and by other political philosophers Jon Elster, Jürgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, to name just a few.

Deliberative democracy grounds the legitimacy of policies and governmental decisions in the citizens' public deliberation. Its underlying assumptions are that legislation is based on reasons, that citizens are reasonable human beings, who engage in civic self-governance through participatory politics. Briefly stated, deliberative democracy designs an ideal model of political autonomy based on the "practical reasoning of citizens" (Bohman, Rehg. 2002 : ix).

Another terms of high currency has been suggested by Benjamin Barber. Barber has been building a case for what he calls "strong democracy" as a way of living politics not just in America, where it is proposed to counter democratic deficit, but on a global scale, in the aftermath of the fall of Communism and the opening up to democratic regimes of countries that have lived under dictatorship and tyranny. Barber also takes into account the impact of globalization on democratic regimes worldwide, and the emergence of the new media that could both enable and obstruct democratic and deliberative processes of political deliberation and decision making. His idea of strong democracy does not aim to drastically alter the state of the art, i.e. the predominance of representative democracy, but to turn it form a "thin" democracy into a "strong" democracy that would be based on, and foster, civic participation.

Other political theorists, however, have envisaged radical alterations in the way politics is done. Sheldon S. Wolin, for instance, is such a proponent of radical democracy. Inspired by the New Left ethos, Wolin argues that the phrase "democratic state" has acquired the status of an oxymoron under the current circumstances marked by the rise of the megastate: big government supported by and supporting big business (Lacey, 2008 : 21). In *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2008), Sheldon S. Wolin argues that American politics, relying on the pervasive manipulative force of the media, have managed to create and support a myth of political global mission that is deeply inconsequential with and indifferent to the common American realities. His radical version of democracy is set to debunk the mythical allure of American exceptionalism in international politics and to



bring decision making to the level of the people who actually live the consequences of the decisions being made, in an iconoclastic break of big government and its claims at military imperialism .

Underlying these moderate and radical theories of participatory democracy is the acknowledgement of the plurality of citizens' interests, priorities and needs, and the ensuing potential for civil strife in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society; at the same time, they envisage possibilities for civil harmony based on a discursively-constructed and negotiated commonality of interests and values. This highly optimistic view of human nature and human society is, however, utopic. The Kantian ideal of "the public use of reason" (Bohman, Rehg, 2002 : x) is challenged by the group and individual competition for identity politics, for rights to be accepted as different, to be integrated, yet not assimilated.

In opposition to this optimistic, leftist confidence in the possibilities to reach consensus and support for discursively negotiated common causes stand Joseph Schumpeter and his followers. The so-called elitist theory of democracy that they developed is informed by an anti-populist sentiment and it starts from empirical findings of political sociology. Political sociology has proven that citizens in modern democracies are politically uninformed, apathetic, and prone to manipulation. This apparently extreme view, in comparison with the others presented above, can be understood if we consider the context in which Schumpeter developed his theory: the rise of National Socialism. This is why he believed participation to be downright dangerous. To counterbalance the danger, Schumpeter prioritized stability over popular participation. Partaking of Max Weber's pessimism about politics as the battlefield where "gods and demons fight it out", Schumpeter argued that "there is, first, no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on" (Bohman, Rehg, 2002 : xi). Consequently, in Schumpeter's view, governance functions best when it is left in the hands of leadership elites. In such a view, democracy is distilled into a negative control over elected leaders, who are stimulated to work efficiently by the possibility of being turned out of office at the next election. Against Deweyan enthusiasm over the propensity of free will to poise humans for civic action, democratic realists take the stand that it is unlikely for citizens to ever commit considerable time and energy to civic life and if they would, they would not necessarily do it in an intelligent and judicious way. Radical versions of democracy would pave the way for ill-advised policies and majority tyranny, therefore a working democracy necessarily requires institutional safeguards to protect individual rights.

#### **4. Conditions of possibility and fieldwork reality of participatory democracy in Romania**

For the purpose of this article, I understand participatory democracy as an alternative and a complement to representative democracy, based on conscious, personally-motivated involvement in a communitarian process of

decision-making that aims to address real needs emerging at grassroots level and to achieve results that directly respond to those needs, in the context of a mutually respectful and open social dialogue. Participatory democracy is the means towards self-governing and self-sustaining communities, the new (utopian?) desideratum that is expected to remedy the various and multiplying pathologies of late modernity: political disengagement, social anomy, loneliness, selfishness, greed, unethical acts in business and politics, social exclusion, intolerance of difference, social suffering, power and wealth inequalities, etc.

In what follows, I would like to address two major issues: the conditions of possibility and the practice of participatory democracy in Romania, as I could assess it during and after conducting fieldwork. I use the term “conditions of possibility” in a rather vernacular understanding, to refer to the broader social, economic, political and cultural context that enables the emergence of a certain phenomenon or event (e.g. the emergence and fostering of participatory democracy), and not in its original Kantian sense of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Modality conditions that enable Knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

### **(a) Conditions of possibility**

At a macropolitical level, what has brought ideas of participatory democracy more into focus recently were certain provisions in the Treaty of Lisbon. The Treaty was adopted in December 2007 and it entered into force in December 2009. Article 8 A, paragraph 3, stipulates that “Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.” Article 8 B flashes out new ways by which Europe can become a more transparent and democratic space, and aims to ensure that citizens have new venues of interacting with European institutions in a public exchange of views (see Appendix 1). This document embraces a moderate, technical view of participatory democracy as a complement to representative democracy, and a means to ensure transparency and efficiency at local level. It is, thus, in Barber’s term, a way to build “strong” democracy in the member states and across Europe.

At national level, provisions for participatory democracy are made in Law number 215, initially passed in 2001 and amended several times since then. Chapter 7 is dedicated to citizen initiative (see Appendix 2 for this article in English translation). This article creates the legal framework within which, at local level, citizens can propose laws, endorse such legal projects, and subject them to the local council, to be debated and approved. This article opens up one venue of participatory democracy and self-governance, namely the initiation and formulation of decisions that are aimed to address grass-roots needs and solve local problems as the citizens whose lives will be affected by them wish them to be.

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<sup>2</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, first printed in 1781.

However, setting the European and national legal framework in place are not sufficient conditions for participatory democracy. Citizens do not take initiative overnight, and a culture of participation takes time to emerge. Initiative needs to be learnt and culturally, socially and politically encouraged, in an “open society” that allows the co-habitation of differences, the dialogue across them and the discursive negotiation of solutions. Citizens need to learn how to listen to their neighbours, enter into dialogue with them, co-formulate their claims, navigate the existing and multiplying channels of communication and speak to power efficiently. Collective deliberation takes time and energy, and, according to some scholars, the professionalization of discourse in the public sphere (Farte, 2010 : 135-136).

In the current globalizing world, marked by increased technological development and the development of new media of communication, the internet and the popular social media have created new venues for awareness raising, information sharing, discursive action and revolutionary surges. The uprising in the aftermath of elections in the Republic of Moldova in 2009 which contested the majority vote won by communists was called the Twitter Revolution because Twitter was the channel used by insurgents to mobilize their friends, colleagues, family or neighbours to action. The social media have also been prominently used in the recent student revolts in France, to protest the raise of the retirement age.

As these two examples have shown, the new media have a huge potential to bring people together and stimulate them to engage in collective action. These two examples also highlight the use of the new media in exceptional states of uprising. They can, however, be used for the purpose of fostering democracy under “normal” political conditions as well. State institutions have been opening up and adapting to the digital revolution by creating the technical infrastructure through which citizens can communicate their grievances or opinions online. The new forms of e-governance make it possible for participatory democracy to function at local level and national level, as well as transnationally. Issues of local relevance can rally support from an international audience, and thus, in a dialogue across nations and cultures, they can be better formulated and they can stand better chances to win in the marketplace of ideas, causes to be defended and projects to be approved. An illustrative example in this case would be the success of the civil society’s attempts to stop the Rosia Montana project. A matter of local concern – the opening of a gold mine – rallied antagonists at national, European and international level, with ex-journalist Stephanie Roth turned into ecological activist and engine of the international anti-mining campaign.

At individual and community level, what makes participation possible is an ethics of social solidarity and responsibility for oneself and for one’s neighbour, care and trust in oneself and in one’s neighbours, mutual respect, openness and empathy. These virtues of politically-oriented engagement do not, obviously, emerge naturally in an individual and in a group. This is why

education for democracy plays a major role in the shaping of committed and responsible citizens. Civic education can take place at home, in the family, in peer groups, but institutionalized education can also have a significant impact on the formation of citizens. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> and as I will reiterate later in the article, universities in particular can appeal to students' minds, hearts and consciousness to prepare them for community-based activism and participation in politics.

### **(b) Fieldwork reality**

I went to attend local council meetings with the rather naive expectation that I would see citizens pleading for their individual or collective claims, building their case on logical arguments and heroically winning it. However, in none of the meetings that I attended did I see anyone else being present than the mayor, the vice-mayor, the secretary and the elected members of the local council. In the video of a meeting posted by the Local Council in Vaslui (August 2010) there are two citizens (a young athlete and her trainer) present in the council room for opening and first point on the agenda of the meeting, but they left the room after their merits were officially acknowledged, at the mayor's initiative. The fact that this is the only video of a meeting posted on the local council's website has made me to infer that this public recognition of the athlete's symbolic contribution to the promotion of the local community in Romania and abroad was the sole reason why the meetings was recorded and made available to the public.

From my unstructured interviews with mayors, secretaries, and Public Relation officers I persistently asked "Where are the locals? Where are the citizens?" The answers that I have received pointed out to the fact that the occasions when citizens come to speak to the local power are so rare that remembering the precise meeting when such a dialogue with citizens occurred is an impossible task. In rural areas, when citizens have a problem that can be solved by the local council, they talk to the member of the local council who lives in the same area with them and he (the gender distribution in local councils favours men) is entrusted to present their requirements. Thus, most often than not, in the context of local council meetings, the voice of citizens is mediated (re-presented) in the voice of another person, as "reported" speech, reformulated, and condensed. If not mediated by the voice of somebody else, it is mediated and constrained in the tight jacket of official documents that are acceptable to be brought to the attention of the local power. In these documents, the citizen is not a person, but subject of the state, identifiable by the name and address registered in the state's records. A case, rather than a person.

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<sup>3</sup> "Innovation in Higher Education: Preparing Graduates for Participatory Democracy", in Luminita Andrei Cocarta, Sorina Chiper, Ana Sandulovici (Ed) *Language, Culture and Change*, II, *Higher Education between Tradition and Innovation*, Editura Universitatii Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iasi

In the meetings that I have attended, most of the issues presented as emerging from citizens were requests for financial assistance: to improve the housing conditions of poor families, to add to the monthly revenue of poor families or to pay tuition for an employee in the local administration who wanted to register for a Master's programme. The logic at work in analysing these individual cases was similar, yet backed by different motivations: giving money to one would encourage either that person, or others, to rely on the state to solve their problems. In the cases of the persons who were asking for financial help for their basic needs, my initial reaction was that this was the logic of stigma: stigma of poverty, stigma of alcoholism, which blocks the possibility of interpersonal care and degrades the person in need to a "less than human" status. It was argued that the money would be used for alcohol, encourage laziness and lack of responsibility for one's individual life and well-being.

The stigmatizing logic became all the more apparent when I contrasted it to how the petition for tuition money was handled. Everybody agreed that there are no funds to pay for tuition, yet the local counsellors showed extreme concern for the framing of the refusal to grant the money. They did not want to employee to take the refusal personal and therefore become "upset" with the members of the local council. I interpreted this concern to "save face" – as it is termed by sociolinguistics – as an interference of the logic of the local culture into the discourse of objective, impartial legal entitlements and the pragmatic discussions over available funds. Thinking along the logic of local cultural values, one counsellor suggested that the request should be granted a positive vote that should be registered in writing, as a proof of the council's benevolence. However, the written response to which the claimant is entitled should specify that the money does not exist in the budget, therefore the decision that has been approved cannot be carried out. This solution that was culturally viable was countered by the recourse to the logic of public administration procedures: as another counsellor pointed out, approving a decision in writing, and expecting it not to be carried out because there are no means for it, can cause juridical problems once the decision reached the local council at district level. The authorities at that level will most likely judge the document according to the general procedures, i.e. a decision that has been voted for must be carried out. Therefore, by approving it, the local council "saves face" in relation to the claimant, but "loses face" in relation to the administrative authorities above it, in the hierarchical structures. What was more, according to the most recent regulations, the claimant was not even entitled to benefit from public money therefore, by approving the request, the local council would expose itself to being construed by the authorities above as not familiar with the law and therefore, incompetent.

The absence of citizens from meetings, not only as interlocutors and initiators of law drafts, as Law 215 wants them to be, but also as proficient on-

line communicators as the UE citizen initiative programme casts them to be, prompted me to look for on-line recordings of citizen-local council encounters and for written documents in which the citizens “speak to power.” Among decision proposals submitted for approval, there are frequent requests for changes in the name of streets or institutions, to solidify the memory of a certain person in the local community and, possibly, to suggest him or her as a model to be emulated. Other high-frequency requests are land concessions, approvals to build, exchanges of real-estate properties, changes of the ownership status of real-estate, etc. So far, I have not encountered instances where citizens acted on their legal rights, stipulated in Chapter 7, Law 215, which entitles them to have legal initiative, to propose a legal draft and support it with arguments in writing. In my corpus, legal initiative belongs to Mayors and occasionally, to members of the local council.

This lack is quite telling: on the one hand, a pessimistic conclusion that one might draw from it is that citizens do not have initiative. This could be, in part, explained by citizens’ ignorance of their rights, duties, obligations and opportunities for action, from lack of recognition and of a cultural climate that would acknowledge and encourage initiative “at home,” within the collective in which it emerges. On the other hand, the lack of initiative could be accounted for by a certain Romanian cultural tendency to accept the *status quo* as a stable and unchangeable fact, bestowed upon the individual or the community by external, uncontrollable forces, by fate or by God. It was not rare to hear the phrase “Asta e!” (“That’s it”) during meetings to suggest an unchangeable state of facts. What is more, the way in which meetings are constructed as a sociolinguistic event in-place leaves little room for citizen discursive action.

Even if citizens were to have initiative and to come to the room where meetings are held, the way in which local council meetings are run and the physical strictures of the space where they are held is not likely to encourage them to take part in discussions. Sometimes, the discussions in the local council meetings are the tip of the iceberg of discussion and negotiation carried out in commissions designated to tackle certain issues on a permanent basis, or in commissions created to deal with particular problems as they occur. The local council meeting is forum where the members of the council sanction the legal draft that was debated and possibly rephrased in field-specific commissions. In the local council meeting, upon request, the initiator of the legal draft can offer clarifications, illustrations, explanations, and the council members who are present can ask questions, but this discussion occurs after the legal draft has been formulated and backed by supporting documents. This is why, someone who attends only the meeting, without having followed the train of thought that has gone behind the discussions during the meeting, finds himself or herself *in media res* and quite unable to understand everything.

### **(c) Local council meetings from a socio-linguistic perspective**

A brief geosemiotic<sup>4</sup> analysis of the location where meetings are held shows that the placement of furniture creates a divide between the persons who run the meeting or keep the minutes and the council members who do not have a special designated role in the meeting other than that to participate. Local council meetings take place at long tables, with the Mayor, chairperson of the meeting and secretary positioned at one end, right in front of the symbols of national power: the flag and the coat of arms. In other cases, the Chairperson and secretary are seated on a dais, higher than the council members and thus, at a distance from them. Both emplacements index higher power in comparison with the other persons who attend the meeting.

In the videos posted online, guests are seated away from the table where the council members are seated; they have a marginal position and leave the room when they have accomplished their symbolic duty. The table indexes a closed group of speakers, more empowered than the ones who could occupy the seats by the walls and which would be taken by citizens, should they attend. This type of emplacement, obviously, is not conducive to dialogue with persons who are not seated at the table. Although meetings are public and an unspecified number of citizens can attend, the council meeting rooms that I have seen, on line or by being present there, are not designed to accommodate more persons than the ones that must attend and maybe, a few guests.

Attending local council meetings reminded me of the time when I had to attend language classes, as a teacher trainee. The chairman of the meeting plays the part of the teacher-as-facilitator, with the members of the local council seated as disciplined pupils in a classroom. As practitioners in education know, rigid, unmovable furniture in the classroom encourages students to be quiet, to hide behind a taller person and drift off, rather than join the discussions. This is not the case in communication labs, where furniture can be rearranged, students can be seated in a circle, move from one location to another, and made to feel that they have an equal standing and equal right to take the floor.

I believe that some of the results of multimodal research in educational settings can be brought to bear on the geo-semiotic dispositions of the locations where meetings are held. Should the problem of emplacement be solved, there remains yet another: language. Local council meetings are ritualized discursive events, that follow a standard script:

- the elected chairperson of the meeting declares the meeting open;
- the elected chairperson/the secretary checks if the quorum for decision-making is met and explains, if necessary, why certain council members are not present;

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<sup>4</sup> The term was introduced by Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon to refer to the “‘in place’ meanings of signs and discourses and the meanings of our actions in and among those discourses in place” (Scollon, Scollon, 2003 : 1).

- the elected chairperson reads the meeting agenda and invites local council members to vote for it;
- the local council members vote;
- the elected chairperson invites the council members to vote the minutes of the previous meeting;
- the council members vote;
- the elected chairperson submits the second point of the agenda to public debate and/or vote;
- a representative from the commission where the directive draft has been discussed may express the view of the commission;
- the council members vote;
- the elected chairperson submits the  $n$  point of the agenda to public debate and/or vote;
- a representative from the commission where the directive draft has been discussed may express the view of the commission;
- the council members vote;
- the elected chairperson invites council members to present topical issues that were not on the agenda but that are worthy of discussing in the plenary meeting;
- individual council members take the floor
- the elected chairperson asks if there are any other issues for discussion
- if there are no more other issues, the elected chairperson declares the meeting closed.

Throughout the meeting, the secretary takes the minutes, types them afterwards, circulates them among the participants who, during the next meeting, will be required to sanction their accuracy by voting. The secretary is also in charge with drawing the agenda of the next meeting, the directive drafts and their supportive documents.

Both the written documents that discursively frame meetings and the spoken interaction during them is highly formulaic, fossilized into set phrases that are meant to convey several discursive effects: legitimacy, persuasiveness, efficiency, rationality, politeness, abidance by standards of public speech. In writing, the impersonal “voice” of local authorities is constructed through the extensive use of nouns derived from verbs (approval, disposition, decision, voting, suggestion, etc), and of passive and passive – reflexive verbal forms, usually with no agent expressed: “the directive draft is submitted to voting,” “problems related to church revenues must be solved by the Parish board, not by the local council,” “the directive draft was rejected,” “being approved by a unanimity of votes,” (Minutes of meeting of the Local Council in Valeni, Vaslui, 31.08.2009), “money shouldn’t be given out of charity, but only after the projected work has been done,” “a schedule of activities must be drawn,” “they cannot be required to work anymore,” “the car is registered under the son-in-law’s name,” “social assistance beneficiaries have been used by the mayor, vice-mayor and the accountant,” “the allocation of plots of land was done with the



approval of the council,” “it was known that the plots were on low, flat land” (Minutes of the Local Council Meeting in Valeni, Vaslui, 20.07.2009).

In minutes, transition from one point on the agenda to the next is expressed in set phrases: “Since there were no more significant discussion on this directive draft, the latter is submitted to voting being approved with unanimity of votes” (Minutes of the Local Council Meeting in Valeni, Vaslui, 20.07.2009). This phrase is reiterated after reporting each discussion of the points on the agenda, and reiterated at the end when, “Since there were no more significant discussions, the chairperson of the meeting, Mr. ...., suggests ending the extraordinary meeting of the Local Council of today, 20.07.2010, and declares the meeting closed” (Minutes of the Local Council Meeting in Valeni, Vaslui, 20.07.2009).

In speech, formulas abound as well: “Good afternoon and welcome to the local council meeting. With your permission, I will read out the agenda” (audio recording of the meeting in Movileni, 30.08.2010), “with your permission, let us continue our meeting,” “Gentlemen, we submit to your analysis and approval the agenda of the meeting,” “Gentlemen, we submit to your analysis and approval the modification of the local budget” (video recording of the meeting in Vaslui, August 2010), “since there are no more standing issues, I declare the meeting closed. Thank you for your participation” (audio recording of the meeting in Movileni, 30.08.2010).

What these formulas reveal, together with the recurrent appeal to articles in laws, is that the interaction order (Goffman) of local council meetings functions best via recourse to “explicit performative utterances” (Austin) and to procedural forms. Procedural forms are, in fact, one way in which the state has been policing the public domain. As representatives of the community and of the state apparatus, members of the local council are in the position to willingly embrace their own policing in the context of the meeting. The policing of the self is obvious if we contrast the interaction patterns, tone of the voice, posture and gestures before and after the meeting, with the ones “presented” to the others during the meeting. In analysing the presentation of the self in public, Goffman has highlighted the performative nature of the self in situations of contact (i.e. when persons are engaged in face-to-face interaction). Goffman’s focus on the performative self complements Austin’s interest in language as performance. Before Austin (1962), language was generally understood as description of referents in the real world, and meaning came from the socially constant attribution of an arbitrary signifier to a signified in the world. Austin, following Wittgenstein, pointed out that language does more than to state a description of facts, that can be judged as true or non-true; language can do something in the world, can perform actions: greetings, invitations, suggestions, apologies, insults, etc. The script that I presented above is precisely a succession of performative speech acts, among which others can be interspersed: swearing (when taking the office), agreeing, disagreeing, complaining, apologising, congratulating, etc.

Members of the local council bring at least two socially constructed selves to the table in the meeting room: their selves as locals, with their private interests, passions and emotions, and their constructed identity as representatives of the state's apparatus. During meetings, they are expected to endorse the situated role (Goffman, 2004 : 40) of the reasonable, controlled, civilized and civil public officer. Endorsement of the role is enacted (performed) by inhabiting the impersonal voice of the state and by resorting to procedures and legal documents to legitimize their act as a public officer. However, the private self cannot become totally dormant. The social actors who have to perform on the dias, on the platform, or at the head of the table, in a standing position (the chairman, the secretary, the mayor) are expected to embrace their role, i.e. "to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it" (Goffman, 2004 : 36). This embracement is one of the conditions of reality of the meeting that is performed. The other participants can take distance from their situated role, and allow their passions and emotions to interfere in their performance.

One of the rules for turn-taking in a local council meeting is that whoever wishes to take the floor, should raise their hand and wait for approval from the chairperson to be allowed to speak. This artifice in the ritual of scripted performance became topical in the meeting in Movileni in August 2010, when the chairman allowed a speaker to have the floor, even though he had not raised his hand. When another person took the conversational turn without raising his hand first, was interrupted and asked to comply with the hand-raising rule in order to be granted permission to talk, he experienced "loss of face" (Goffman, 2004 : 110): he felt offended, stepped off his role as an impersonal, reasonable and self-policed counsellor and experienced anger at what felt, to him, a biased treatment. The chairman did not engage in "remedial interchange" (Goffman, 2004 : 119), but ignored his outburst of passion, which resulted in the deepening of the feeling of offense experienced the person who lost face, and who then refused to engage in discussions.

This small incident brought out the sensitiveness of face-work in the context of meetings as a socially situated discursive event. Rituals of supportive face work take the discursive shape of deferring to the audience, as in the repeated use of the formula "with your permission," but obviously remedial interchanges in the form of apologies are also needed to keep all interlocutors actively present in the social "game." Sociolinguists interested in differences between men and women in their conversational styles have pointed out that women tend to be more polite than men, to show more deference to the others, and be more willing to apologise than men. However, at the moment, the percentage of women engaged in local politics is rather low, therefore men in local politics could benefit from reflecting on their communication styles and improving them.

## 5. Civic Education for Participatory Democracy

Citizenship education presents itself as a solution to foster a new *forma mentis* that would make agency, and not complacency with the *status quo*, a virtue of self-governing communities, and that would make the citizens aware of their rights, obligations and opportunities for civic action. The civil society has developed a few initiatives to support the European agenda of enhancing participation at local level, but the steps that have been taken are rather timid. To give just an example, Qvorum – the European Institute of Participatory Democracy, which operates in Bruxelles, Bucharest, Cluj and other cities in Romania, offers trainings to prepare businesses, unions, and public institutions to take part decision making and learn how to govern themselves. Apart from NGOs, universities can have a significant role in preparing graduates for participatory democracy, as well as in engaging in educational programmes targeted to the local community.

In its Humboldtian understanding, the university as a modern institution is independent of interference from the state, combines education with research, offers free and universal education to all citizens and creates a non hierarchical context for learning, in which students and professors are equally engaged in the co-production of knowledge. Humboldt's 1809-1810 ideas, influenced the ethos of universities in Europe and the United States, although in its entirety, the Humboldtian idea of the university has remained a myth rather than been totally actualized.

In a diachronic perspective, Universities have played a significant role in nation building through the production of indigenous elites (Ahier *et al*, 2003 : 1). The Robbins Report, in Britain, in 1963, identified “the transmission of a common culture and standards of citizenship” (Ahier *et al*, 2003 : 1) as one of the main goals of higher education. Current economic pressures have forced universities to turn into “multiversities”- a term coined by Clark Kerr (Annette, 2003 : 42) to refer to the new forms of higher education institutions focused on technological expertise and narrow academic specialization. They have also been pressured into adopt strategies of the market in order to attract more national and international tuition-paying students. While Humboldt envisioned universities as hubs for the production of intellectual elites, a large percentage of tertiary education institutions nowadays educate masses of students or rather, train them for their future jobs.

In times of crisis education has often been construed as a solution, if not *the* solution. Probably more than a solution to the economic crisis, education is a solution to the axiological crisis perceived in the society at large, from corporation management and government officials to cheaters in exams, users of pirated software, etc. In reconceptualising the role of universities in society, citizenship education is a new and timely innovation.

In B.S. Turner's definition, citizenship education is “that set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) which define a person as a competent

member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups” (Ahier *et al.*, 2003 : 12). In their unpacking of the term, John Ahier, John Beck and Rob Moore see it as including the following elements:

- universality: rights and obligations of citizenship apply, at least in principle, to all those considered citizens;
- a criterion of exclusion that defines the external and internal boundaries of the application of citizenship;
- rights or entitlements: civil liberties, certain welfare entitlements;
- legally sanctioned obligations (e.g. to pay taxes, to be available for military service, to vote, etc);
- normatively sanctioned responsibilities or virtues (e.g. Rawls’s principles of public reasonableness and reciprocity) (Ahier *et al.*, 2003 : 12)

Citizenship education is, for McCowan, “any education that addresses the individual as a member of a polity (rather than solely as a member of a cultural group or an economic system – though not excluding these aspects” (McCowan, 2009 : 21). The particular attributes that citizenship education sets out to develop are knowledge (of national history, political institutions and the working of the national state, of the constitutions and government structures), skills (of citizen participation) and values (i.e. commitment to a more specific moral and political vision) (McCowan, 2009 : 22-23).

Addressing the question of how to promote values, McCowan lists three methods that can be used: (a) exhortation (teachers encourage or guide students to adopt them);

(b) exemplification (teachers demonstrate their allegiance to values in their lives and actions); (c) reflection (students develop their own understanding of values) (McCowan, 2009 : 23).

The site of McCowan’s investigation was K-12 educational institutions. Universities, obviously, pose different challenges to the introduction, crediting and evaluation of citizenship education, and provide another set of actual means by which citizenship education can be done. In universities – as J. H. Newman wrote in *The Idea of University* – the most important educators are one’s peers (Arthur, 2005 : 2). It is in campus communities of peers that students acquire the habits of the mind and of the heart that will shape their moral profile, their set of virtues and values, and their character.

Popular wisdom in Romania has it that education for character takes place at home, during the 7 years that children spend with their families before going to school. Neuroscience, however, has proved that a second stage of brain development takes place in late teens and early twenties, during which the frontal lobes and subcortical areas of the brain mature. These areas are associated with abstract thought and memory, attention and emotional control. Therefore, from the point of view of their mental and emotional development, students are at an impressionable age, when education for character can be very effective (Bohlin, 2005 : 78).

MacIntyre (1981) posits that we live “after virtue”, in a society of incoherent, unreasonable and therefore failing morality. His realistic assessment of the modern moral discourse seems to leave little room for a redemption of the moral state, other than through a return to the Aristotelian tradition and to the understanding of morals and virtues in relation to communities, and not to the individual, as the Enlightenment ethos would have it.

If modern universities are to take on the task to “redeem” individuals and society from broken moral values, apathy and self-absorption, they can do so by encouraging students to engage in volunteer activities, in response to needs in the local community, by creating a context for social learning, social engagement, initiative and recognition of their merits. In this respect, Romanian university can find inspiration in societies where the role of universities as part of the consciousness of a democratic society has long been acknowledged.

In American and British Universities, citizenship education is the “hidden agenda” of service learning<sup>5</sup> or community-based learning, an academic endeavour which supposes “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle, Hatcher, 1999 : 180). A few initiatives that are worth listing are: The John Templeton Foundation’s Initiative on College and Character (US) which has given recognition to colleges and universities where students, tutors, institutional leadership and parents (occasionally) work together to inspire students to “live ethical and civic-minded lives” (The Templeton Guide, 1999), via academic honesty programmes, faculty and curriculum programmes, volunteer service programmes, substance-abuse prevention programmes, student leadership programmes, spiritual growth programmes, civic education programmes, and character and sexuality programmes; the Clearinghouse, sponsored by the Division of Student Affairs at The Florida State University in the USA, which aims to further and shape research on character development programmes in colleges and universities in the USA and abroad; the CSV/Council for Citizenship and Learning in the Community, that has been working in partnership with over 200 programmes in British higher education institutions to promote citizenship learning through university-community partnerships; the “Higher Education Active Community Fund” established by the British

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<sup>5</sup> In the United States, service learning became prominent beginning with the 1980s, and it was informed by the writings of Ernst Boyer, a fervent supporter of the “engaged campus” (Annette, 2005 : 63) and of Thomas Ehrlich. Although it had actually originated in the 1960s, in its current practice, what sets it apart from “traditional” service learning is the current institutionalized link between citizenship education and service learning. It is a form of multidisciplinary learning that can be integrated in a variety of disciplines; it involves students working in partnership with local communities and learning through a structured programme which includes reflection on the learning.

government in 2002, which has founded the set-up of community service programmes (Annette, 2005 : 47).

In Romania, citizenship education is still in its early days. However, there have been a few laudable initiatives. The faith-based student organization ASCOR (The Orthodox Christian Student Association of Romania) has been developing volunteering programmes in local communities where there are universities for the past twenty years, working to support institutionalized elderly persons, orphans, persons with disabilities or persons living in extreme poverty; TERIS Association (the Association of Young Romanian Ecologists from Iasi) has developed programmes to raise awareness of ecological issues in the local community, has been involved in cleaning green areas and educating the public in ecological issues. The Students of Economics League organized food drives on Easter 2010 for the benefit of children with disabilities and terminally ill old persons in the Iasi area, while in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, for the past three years, students and professors have organized a football game whose ticket sales benefits go to charitable purposes.

## **6. Trust and Self-Trust as Prerequisites for Self-Governing Communities**

As all persons who work in education know, learning from one's peers in an informal way, as in the citizenship education initiatives presented above, as well as learning from and with a professor, requires an investment of will. No one can teach anything to someone who wouldn't learn. Desire to learn is a precondition to acquiring knowledge or skills, but not the single one. Apart from the intellectual capacity to learn, one also needs to trust himself or herself that he or she can learn, trust the formal or informal teachers, and trust that what is learnt collectively is valuable.

Democracy, be it representative or participatory, works by virtue of legitimizing one's position and gaining support from others, to reach a consensus on the basis of which to pass decisions. The American philosopher Keith Lehrer has developed a theory of consensus based on reason, trust, and worthiness. In response to the attack of reason by romantics, existentialists, feminists etc, as forcing conformity to essentialist, universal rules, and thus skirting individual autonomy, Lehrer proposes a theory of reason grounded in self-trust and personal evaluation of social rules. The starting point is our beliefs and desires, to which we apply evaluation. The positive evaluation of beliefs yields acceptance, whereas the positive evaluation of desires yields preference. Acceptance falls under the province of intellectual reason, whereas preference falls under practical reason (Lehrer, 2002 : 2-6). Acceptance and preference have different objectives: "The objective of acceptance is to accept something if it is worth accepting as true and to avoid acceptance of what is not. The object of preference is to prefer what has merit and to avoid what has merit and to avoid preferring what does not" (Lehrer, 2002 : 3).

Reason guides us in using the information that we have, to come to acceptance and preference. The success of this enterprise depends on self-trust: “I trust myself in what I accept and prefer, and I consider myself worthy of my trust in what I accept or prefer. Acceptance and preference are... my best efforts to obtain truth and merit, and if they are not worthy of my trust, then I am not worthy of my trust, and reason is impotent” (Lehrer, 2002 : 5). One needs to trust oneself in what he or she accepts or prefers, and to be worthy of self-trust.

Reasonable acceptance and preference are means to obtain knowledge (at an intellectual, theoretical level) and wisdom (at the level of practice). They are arrived at through the workings of one’s evaluation system, which decides – reasonably – whether something is worth accepting or preferring. The relationship between acceptance and preference and the evaluation system on which they are based is dynamic, so that acceptances and preferences can change the evaluation system on which they are based (Lehrer, 2002 : 58).

A similar dynamic relationship is at work when analysing self-trust and one’s trust in others: “As we trust others and evaluate whether they are worthy of our trust, however, we trust ourselves and accept that we are worthy of our trust in making that judgment. ... As a result of considering others worthy of our trust, we modify ourselves and become more worthy of our trust as a result of trusting them” (Lehrer, 2002: 126). This extension of one’s own trust to others is relevant for our discussion of participatory democracy. By positively evaluating the trustworthiness of others, one can change what he or she accepts or prefers, and thus can change the way in which he or she acts in the world. This change can make one more trustworthy for himself or herself and for others.

In a group, trustworthiness is evaluated and aggregated. One assigns different levels of trust to different people, depending on their expertise and its relevance to the context in which the assignment of trust occurs. One also modifies what he or she accepts and prefers “in terms of the weight” of trust that he or she gives to the others (Lehrer, 2002 : 128-129). Thus, trust in the others can pave the way for individual action, and for collective action, if a consensus is reached. Consensus can be reached, indeed, if individuals choose to stay connected (i.e. do not leave the group), are consistent in their attribution of positive weight (trust) to the others and as a result, modify their acceptances and preferences.

If we apply Lehrer’s model to participatory democracy as a field of practice, it would translate in the following way: self-trust is a precondition for citizen’s political acceptances and political preferences. In a group that brings together people of conflicting acceptances and preferences, it is reasonable to trust oneself as well to trust the others in what they accept and prefer. Trusting the others as rational beings, in what they accept and prefer, enables one, after conversation and information sharing, to be persuaded – at least in part – of the truth(s) and values of the other. As a rational being himself or herself, who is worthy of his or her own trust in his or her own evaluation system, he or she can loop back on his or her acceptances and preferences and change them according

to how he or she was persuaded, in conversation, by the worth of the judgments that have dictated the acceptances and preferences of the others. Thus, consensus is reached through aggregation of evaluations. In the specific context of a local council meeting, Lehrer's model explains, in theory, what ethnographer of communication know from practice: consensus is built on mutual recognition of the worth of one's interlocutor and on deference. In addition, Lehrer's model explains how one can change his or her initial views and accept to modify them in discursive negotiation, in response to mental processes of aggregation of evaluations.

Consensus of preference is a prerequisite for the collective and committed action implied in participatory democracy. However, one should not expect general consensus. Individuals always have the option to assign no weight to others, and thus to refuse the dialogue, the connection and the consistency of assigning trust to others. By declining to assign trust in others, they opt themselves out from social action.

While fully appreciating Lehrer's trust aggregation theory as a model to explain how group consensus can be achieved, I believe that its relevance goes beyond consensus. To my mind, self-trust, trust in the others, and the ensuing possibilities to change one's acceptance and preference system highlight the opportunities for learning that come from engaging in a group and staying committed to positive evaluations of the others. This brings us to Dewey's idea of democracy as a venue for learning and personal development, that benefits both the individual and the group. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey conceived of education as a necessity for the life of a community, "a social function, securing direction and development" (Dewey, 2001 : 85). In a consciously assumed and engaged democracy, there are "not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control." Democracy also enables "not only freer interaction between social groups ... but change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse" (Dewey, 2001 : 91). Configuring a common direction, pursuing it and thus developing the community is the goal of self-governance as well. Ideally, a self-governing community is one in which one constantly learns from others and with others, by sharing information, engaging in collective action, and evaluating the information, interaction and action in which he or she was involved or which he or she has witnessed.

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has provided an overview of the emergence and the terminological avatars of the idea of participatory democracy. This idea has become prominent in Europe especially after the Treaty of Lisbon and it is directly linked, in its outcome, to self-governance at community level. In an attempt to investigate how participatory democracy operates on the fringes of



Europe, in urban and rural locations in Eastern Romania, I conducted fieldwork in various local councils, the interface between citizens and power. The sociolinguistic analysis of local council meetings has revealed their rigid, scripted structure, the concern for procedures and the relevance of face-work. At another level, it revealed savvy instances of negotiation between the logic of the local culture and the logic of state's bureaucratic apparatus, the acting out of situated roles and the distance from such roles, when remedial interchanges are not performed. In addition, the fact that I have not encountered instances where citizens acted on the provision of Article 7, Law 215/2001 which stipulates the conditions for citizen legal initiative signalled out to me a deficient citizenship and civic education.

The local authorities' interest in better communication with citizens has been focused on multiplying channels of communication (including digital channels through the internet), on personal availability for audiences. Yet, as my interlocutors at local council level informed me, the real problem is not the channels of communication but education: the education of citizens to become aware of their rights and duties, of what public property, public service and public goods are, and sometimes, the education of their representatives in the local council, in terms of observing norms of polite and constructive communication during council meetings.

Understanding and appreciating the value and meaning of public goods, public service and public property, as well as observing basic rules of respectful communication takes time, and effort, and an investment of trust in one's fellows and in oneself. They require the creation of contexts in which communities can come together and learn how to cooperate, how to deliberate, how to build trust, grant recognition, listen, and assume responsibility for the production, protection and use of public goods. In this endeavour, universities can be a reliable social partner, which can get involved at several levels: as some of my interlocutors suggested, experts from universities could assess the efficiency of citizen-mayor audiences; they could run public communication trainings for the local council; they could become involved in awareness-raising programmes that would allow local communities to acquire "the literacy required to live in a civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberatively in a pluralist world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others" (Barber, 1992 : 4). Thus, universities can contribute to building communities of character and of engagement, communities with a heart and a social and political consciousness, both through their partnership with social agents in the community, and through preparing graduates who can think critically and can commit to a social cause.

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## Appendix

### 1. Fragment from Treaty of Lisbon

#### PROVISIONS ON DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

##### *Article 8*

In all its activities, the Union shall observe the principle of the equality of its citizens, who shall receive equal attention from its institutions, bodies, offices and agencies. Every national of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union shall be additional to national citizenship and shall not replace it.

##### *Article 8 A*

1. The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy.
2. Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.
3. Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.

4. Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.

*Article 8 B*

1. The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.
2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.
3. The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.
4. Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. The procedures and conditions required for such a citizens' initiative shall be determined in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

**2. Fragment from Law 215/2001 (my translation)**

**Local Public Administration Law**

CHAPTER VII – Citizen Initiative

Art. 109. – (1) Citizens can make directive drafts to local councils and district councils under whose jurisdiction they reside, to be debated and approved.

(2) The promotion of a directive drafts can be initiated by one or more citizens entitled to vote, if it endorsed through signature by at least 5% of the population entitled to vote in the respective territorial and administrative unit.

Art. 110. – (1) The initiators file the proposed formulation of the directive drafts to the secretary of the territorial and administrative unit. The draft will be displayed so that the public would be informed, through the care of the secretary of the territorial and administrative unit.

(2) The initiators ensure that the supporter lists are drawn on forms made available by the secretary of the territorial and administrative unit.

(3) The supporter lists will comprise the supporters' surname, first name and residential address, series and number of their identity card and their signatures.

(4) Supporter lists can be signed only by citizens entitled to vote who reside in the area of the respective territorial and administrative unit, and whose local or district council is to debate the respective directive draft.

Art. 111. – After the filing of the documentation and its checking by the secretary of the territorial and administrative unit, the directive draft will follow the working regulatory procedures of the local or district council, as the case may be.