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The Local Public Transport Service in the Municipality of Suceava

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Abstract: In order to optimize the public administration process, the local authorities, which operate in a decentralized regime, provide public services to the population that satisfies the needs of the beneficiaries of the administrative-territorial unit they represent. In this context, in this paper we propose to analyze the local public transport service in the Municipality of Suceava, which is part of the sphere of community services of public utility and which is a decentralized public service subordinated to the Town Hall of the Municipality of Suceava. We want to analyze how this service is provided to the population of Suceava Municipality and whether decentralization has influenced the development of the local public transport service and the effects that decentralization has in terms of increasing the quality of life for the local community.

Keywords: *public services; local public transport; quality indicators; decentralization.*

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1. Introduction

In this article, we aimed to observe how the application of the principle of decentralization can influence the development of local public services and the effects it has in terms of increasing the quality of life for the local community. For this, we analyzed the local public transport service in the Suceava Municipality, which is part of the community services of public utility (Romanian Parliament, 2007) and which is a public service subordinate to the Suceava Municipality.

Suceava is a locality situated on both sides of the river Suceava, in the north-east of Romania, with an area of 52 km², being the main economic, cultural and social center of the county with the same name. The town consists of Burdujeni, Itcani, George Enescu and Obcini districts, with a population of 105,865 inhabitants. The routes that run the buses and minibuses of the local public transport service in the municipality of Suceava are served by 55 buses and 32 minibuses (the TPL car park is equipped with 25 Granton electric buses, 22 Irisbus Citelis buses, 5 Irisbus Agora buses and 3 Mercedes Citaro buses) (The local public transport operator of Suceava Municipality – TPL, 2021).

2. Brief history

Two years before the fall of the communist regime, a network of trolleybuses was established in the town of Suceava, which, together with the existing buses at that time, provided the local passenger transport service. Since 2006, trolleybuses have been removed from the circuit, passenger transport being carried out only by diesel buses and minibuses. In 2005, The Town Hall of Suceava established the current SC TPL SA Suceava, a company delegated to exclusively provide public transport of people within the town (Town Hall Municipality of Suceava, 2021). In the early period of the activity, the company responsible for the public transport of people experienced many shortcomings and difficulties in providing the service. Various factors such as the lack of financial resources, insufficient support from local authorities, the lack of integrity and good intentions of some transport operators or the aging fleet, have led to the steady and predictable decline of the public transport service. In addition to these, the bad condition of the TAU roads and the lack of facilities and comfort in the means of public transport also contributed to the losses suffered. All these chained together led to the dissatisfaction of the beneficiaries of this service

and resulted in a significant decrease in the number of passengers and the income of SC TPL SA.

The year 2010 represented the starting point in the modernization and rethinking of the way in which public transport is carried out for the local community. The representatives of the local public administration were aware of the seriousness of the situation and appealed to European funds to restore the entire public transport system, the money coming from the submitted projects being the only solution through which it was possible to switch to a fully electrified public transport. The possibility of funding from the central level for such an ambitious project was nil, and funding from the local budget was impossible due to insufficient resources. Years passed before the result of the work and effort put in at the local level was crowned with success.

Following the projects with Swiss funds, in the summer of 2019 the first 5 low-capacity electric buses arrived in Suceava (Town Hall Municipality of Suceava, 2021). Through the "Integrated ecological public transport system" project, in 2020, 10 small electric buses and another 25 large electric buses were added. The value of this project amounted to 116,189,650.93 lei including VAT, of which 88,047,185.32 lei represent non-refundable European funds, a percentage of 85% of the total value; the contribution made by the state budget is 13%, i.e. 13,466,040.06 lei, the rest of the amount being covered from the local budget.

In the summer of 2021, the municipality also made available to the local community 50 electric scooters, located in each neighborhood, another initiative that reveals the concerns of the local authorities to improve and diversify the public transport service offered.

3. Quality indicators of the operation of the local public transport service in the Municipality OF Suceava

3.1 The number of the bus routes within the Municipality of Suceava

Within the Municipality of Suceava, the public administration together with the representatives of the local public transport company have created a number of 15 transport lines, dispersed throughout the territory of the administrative-territorial unit, so as to meet the needs of all the citizens of the municipality, including those whose home is located in less trafficked, marginal areas. The type of buses used, their frequency and the route traveled were determined depending on the identified needs. On 8 routes, low-capacity buses and minibuses, with 15 seats, are used, and on the other 7, only high-capacity buses are used, with 90 seats available both on seats

and standing, these serving the busiest routes of the Municipality, such as Burdujeni Orizont, Burdujeni Station, or George Enescu and Obcini neighborhoods. With the exception of two lines, which have the district of Itcani as their starting point, all other lines start from Burdujeni, the large number of passengers as well as the electric bus base located in this district being the main reasons that led to this arrangement.

The most used and crowded lines are 2 and 4, on these routes high-capacity buses are used, at small time intervals so that all requirements are covered. On line 4, on weekdays, 10 buses serve the route, at an average interval of 8 minutes, so that on Saturdays and Sundays the number of means of transport is reduced to 7, with a waiting time of 10 minutes. On the other hand, on line 2, the average waiting interval at the bus stop is the same throughout the week, namely 10 minutes, and in terms of the number of buses used, from Monday to Friday, there are 7, while on non-working days there are only 6.

At the opposite pole, there are lines 28 and 21, on these lines only one transport vehicle is used, with a capacity of 90 seats, which runs 6 trips a day, respectively 5. Another line that needs to be mentioned is line 7, due to the fact that it only operates in July and August. This route was created to meet the demands of the citizens during the summer, when various festivals are organized in the Municipality of Suceava on the Cetatea de Scaun Plateau. Being a location that is more difficult to access and with limited parking spaces, such an initiative from the representatives of the public transport service was necessary. Due to the fact that, over the years, especially in the last decade, the locality experienced a higher degree of development than in previous years, the representatives of the local administration together with the administrators of the company delegated to provide the public service of local transport had to rethink the mode of operation of public transport, so that the residents of border neighborhoods, such as those from the Tinereții neighborhood or the Europa neighborhood, can benefit from public transport services.

In order to maintain a financial balance, since there is a low degree of profitability on these routes, as a result of the lower number of passengers compared to other lines and the fact that most of them are students, small capacity buses have been introduced in these areas, at longer time intervals, of one hour, so that there is satisfaction on the level of the beneficiaries as well as on the part of those responsible for the financial situation of this public service.

3.2 The price of tickets and subscriptions issued by TPL Suceava

From the point of view of the tariffs applied for tickets and subscriptions, a characteristic of the Municipality of Suceava is that for two decades now it has been among the cities with the lowest prices for public transport. The local administration promoted a mild policy regarding public transport fares, and at the same time made available to several categories of citizens free or reduced subscription prices. Pensioners, pupils and students have benefited and continue to benefit from half-price subscriptions, and the students who live in Suceava have free public transport. The fact that the administrators of the company were only rarely allowed to change the price of tickets and subscriptions, together with other factors such as the increase in the price of fuel or the increase in wages, especially the minimum wage in the economy, caused the financial situation of TPL to be seriously affected at the end of 2010, the company being on the verge of bankruptcy. Thus, in 2011, some urgent measures were taken to get out of the collapse. Single subscriptions were introduced, and the price of a ticket reached the threshold of 2 lei for a trip, an increase of 0.50 lei. The next increase took place 7 years later, so that from then until now the value of a ticket has remaine the same. As can be seen in the following table, frequent and major changes did not take place, urban transport compared to the current prices being affordable for the entire community.

Table no.1 Price of tickets and subscriptions between 2008-2021

YEAR	TICKET	SUBSCRIPTION
2008	1 lei	30 lei- 1 line 50 lei- 2 lines 60 lei- all lines
2009	1,5 lei	45 lei- 1 line 75 lei- 2 lines 90 lei- all lines
2010	1,5 lei	18 lei- one week 30 lei- two week 30 lei- one month, for pupils and students 50 lei- single subscription
2011	2 lei	22 lei- one week 36 lei- two week 66 lei- single subscription

2018-prezent	2,5 lei	6 lei- one day 27 lei- one week 46 lei- two week 75 lei- single subscription 37,50- pupils and students

Source: The oficial page of the local public transport operator of Suceava Municipality – TPL, 2021

As for the situation of subscriptions, here there have been more obvious changes, both at the price level and in their form. If in 2009, subscriptions were issued for each line separately and the price of one valid on all lines was extremely high, 90 lei, from the following year the single subscription was introduced, its price being 40% lower. Along the way, the value has grown slightly, but its format has remained the same for the past 11 years, with passengers able to travel on all lines with the same travel card. In addition, partial passes, with reduced validity, for a week or two, have been introduced. Viewed with much skepticism at first, the introduction of these measures, especially the single ticket, paid off in the following years, with subscriptions gradually being preferred to tickets.

As can be seen in the figure below, there is a predilection towards the purchase of subscriptions, in the last 5 years the demand for them was on average about 60% higher than for tickets.

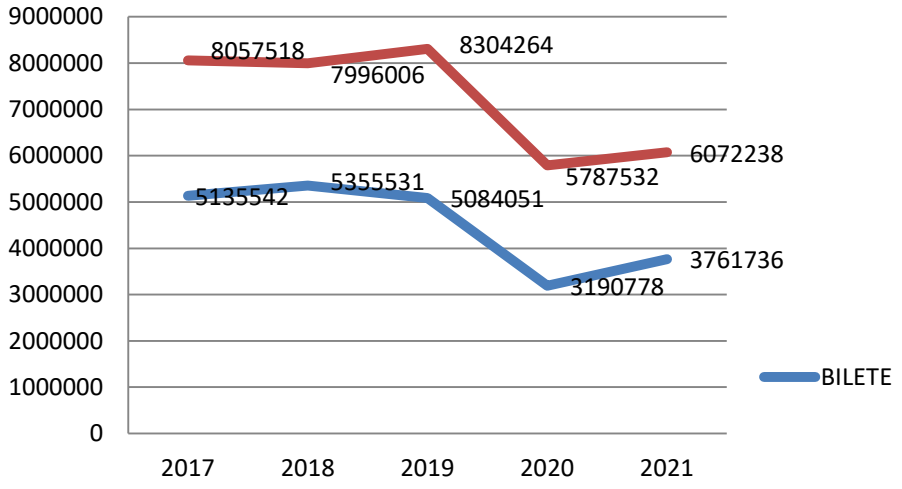


Figure no.1 The evolution of tickets and subscriptions issued between 2017-2021
Source: The official page of the public local transport operator of Suceava Municipality – TPL

2020 was the only year in which there was a significant decrease, both in the number of subscriptions and in the number of tickets sold. The explanation is simple; this situation represents the consequences of the movement restrictions during the global health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the majority of those who used public transport during this period were employees, which obviously led to a greater demand for subscriptions against the tickets. For the year 2021, as a result of the resumption of activities in the usual way, although the demand for both remained at a low level, the differences narrowed, the percentage between them returning to a value of approximately 62%.

Regarding the method of obtaining the subscriptions, within the municipality there are three counters for issuing them, located in key points of the locality, namely Center - bus stop, Obcini-Flori and Burdujeni-Cinema, specifying that in this last location no subscriptions are issued for schoolchildren and students, a somewhat inappropriate decision considering the size of the neighborhood and the number of the population, especially the children who live in this area, and perhaps most importantly the fact that within this neighborhood there are several educational institutions. As a result of this fact, but also of the positioning, at Center - bus stop there is always an influx of people, adults and minors, this counter also solving the requests of students who live in the Burdujeni district.

3.3 Aspects regarding the technical condition of the local public transport service

Regarding the technical condition of the local transport service, as a result of the projects initiated by the local administration to modernize the public transport service, there are 25 large electric buses, purchased with the help of European funds, and 15 small capacity electric buses.



Figure no.2 A large ZTE electric bus
Source: Authors' own conception

The large electric buses have a capacity of 90 seats, a smaller number compared to diesel buses, and each has a range of 250 km, surveillance cameras, air conditioning and an automatic passenger counting system. The small electric buses have a capacity of 15 seats, and the payment of the travel ticket is made to the bus driver, on this type of vehicle there are no toll booths.

The TPL bus depot is also equipped with Irisbus Citelis diesel buses, with a capacity of 107 seats, which, due to the high degree of wear and tear, each with over 900,000 km traveled, and the high level of emissions they issue, are used especially on less traveled routes (Town Hall Municipality of Suceava, 2009).

In the fall of 2022, the fleet will be completed with 15 electric buses, purchased with the help of government funds. The responsible ministry organized the procurement procedure, the concluded contract totaling 37.5 million lei without VAT. Once these buses are delivered, diesel buses will be completely phased out, with local public transport going fully hybrid. On the territory of the Municipality, at key points, the electric buses have fast charging stations and the entire car fleet allows access for people with disabilities. The electric fleet has a bus depot built in the Burdujeni district. This is where the bus coordination center is located, where they park and load, and includes 59 charging stations, an ITP station, car service, laundry, and during 2022 the entire company, including the offices, will move the activity in this new headquarters (Town Hall Municipality of Suceava, 2016).



Figure no.3 TPL electric bus depot
Source: Authors' own conception

In addition to the purchase of electric buses and the construction of a new headquarters, the renovation of the bus stops was included in the public transport modernization project. Currently, although few in number, there are bus stops without shelters for public transport users, being only signposted.



Figure no.4 Bus stop without shelter vs renovated bus stop
Source: Authors' own conception

In the figure above you can see the major differences between a bus stop that does not ensure a minimum standard of safety for the beneficiaries of this service and a modernized one, with the related furniture and infrastructure, which includes an electric panel to display real-time information of bus routes, surveillance cameras, electronic system for issuing travel tickets as well as 2 USB ports for charging phones.

4. Conclusions

At the end of this article, we can affirm that the local public transport service in the Municipality of Suceava represents a positive model of what can be achieved at the local level, for the benefit of the community, as the representatives of the local public administration do all the necessary to improve the life of the community, by offering much needed public services, at a level of quality that is more than satisfactory. There are still a few steps until the completion of the transport service modernization project, the most important of which is the creation of a single lane for buses that will have resulting in the shortening of journeys and implicitly the increase in the number of passengers. Through the actions taken, the local administration mainly aimed to provide the local community with a high-

quality and high-performance public transport service, reducing the negative impact of the vehicles used in public transport on the environment, as well as increasing the quality of life for the residents of the Municipality of Suceava.

Regarding the provision of the local public transport service in the Municipality of Suceava, we can therefore observe the advantages of applying the principle of decentralization, through which autonomy was offered to local authorities. Having the necessary legal framework in place and being at a closer level to the beneficiaries of the service, the local public administration was able to manage the operation of the public transport much more effectively than the central authorities would have done. Thus, the necessary framework was created to facilitate the development and improvement of the quality of the service provided for the benefit of the community.

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