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Unlocking Governance: Unveiling the European Journey of Transparency through OGP Initiatives in CEE

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Abstract: *In an era marked by an insistent call for accountable governance and open democracy, transparency has become a key tenet guiding the way toward citizen-centric politics. The following article guides the reader on a fascinating tour through the past twelve years, exploring the core of Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiatives in each of the Central and East European (CEE) countries. With a meticulous gaze, it traverses the varied landscapes of CEE countries, dissecting the evolution of transparency measures within the intricate fabric of each society. Also, this paper examines how technology might act as a catalyst to redefine the parameters of public participation and government transparency in the context of rapidly changing digital environments. Exploring societal transformation, it analyses how transparency initiatives have seeded a culture of engagement while addressing the issues of data privacy and digital inclusion. It also looks at the dynamics of public trust and perception highlighting the delicate balance between objectives and observable results while navigating the occasionally turbulent waters of policy implementation.*

Keywords: *OGP; transparency; public participation; digital environment; govtech; CEE.*

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Introduction

Within the context of modern times of governance, the goal of open and transparent government has become a global necessity that transcends geographical boundaries and political views. According to Curtis & Meijer (2006), transparency has become an essential principle that serves as the foundation for trust and accountability between citizens and the institutions that the government is responsible institutions that the government is responsible for. Across the current landscape of governance, transparency has evolved as a fundamental principle that serves as the foundation for trust and accountability between citizens and the institutions that govern them (Florini, 2007; Open Government Partnership, 2016). Within the framework of this discussion, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) has been instrumental in advancing transparency measures across a number of different regions, including Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The OGP is an international initiative designed to obtain specific commitments from the nations involved to „enhance transparency, empower citizens, combat corruption, and utilize new technologies to improve governance" (Obama, 2009). Originally founded in 2011, the alliance has grown to comprise more than 70 countries, with many Central and Eastern European nations embracing its values and supporting its projects (Dowley, 2006, OECD, 2021). From authoritarian administrations to democratic systems, the governments of these countries (Dąbrowski, 2014) have experienced notable changes. They have also been faced with the difficulties of building effective governing systems and winning public confidence concurrently.

This article establishes foundations by examining the individual transparency initiatives of CEE countries inside the OGP framework to provide insightful analysis of how these policies have impacted government transparency, public participation, and the strengthening of democracies as a whole (Open Government Partnership, 2021). This will help one explore the OGP's influence on openness in these countries.

Overview of OGP's formation and primary objectives

The origins of the OGP can be traced back to the collaborative efforts of government leaders and civil society organizations, who recognized the urgent need to address the growing challenges of corruption, mismanagement, and erosion of public trust. Planning to provide a multilateral platform for governments to make real promises and implement

reform proposals, OGP aimed to catalyze a global movement towards more open, inclusive, and participatory governance (Obama, 2009).

Fundamentally, the OGP's main goals are four: improving the availability of information about governmental activities, supporting civic participation, applying the highest standards of professional integrity inside governments, and using new technologies to advance openness and responsibility (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014). By means of these guiding ideas, the OGP aims to create an atmosphere whereby people may actively participate in decision-making procedures, hold their governments responsible, and help to produce policies that more benefit their respective areas.

Fostering trust and combating corruption depend on government activities being transparent. Initiatives like the Transparency Register and the European Citizen Initiative—which aim to make government-held data understandable and available to the public—showcase the OGP's dedication to openness. Beginning with prominent pledges to regulatory transparency, CEE nations have started to embrace these values (Laboutková, 2017). Many of these countries have promised OGP publications of forward regulatory plans, hence enhancing public access to legislative procedures (Lightfoot et. al., 2016). Regulatory governance and citizen participation are absolutely vital; open budgets and public forums form basic elements of the governance system. Based on effective models from other European cities, these indicators link communities with their governments and show the flexibility and applicability of the OGP's approach in many settings (Florini, 2007). Notwithstanding great progress, there are still difficulties matching the seeming discrepancy between EU administrative structures and the daily reality of people living in Central and Eastern Europe. While detractors contend that although openness is important, it must be accompanied by significant actions to solve the fundamental problems of corruption and governance quality, many citizens express worries about the efficacy of transparency programs (Curtis & Meijer, 2006; Open Government Partnership, 2021).

Ongoing efforts by the OGP Steering Committee, composed of government and civil society representatives, seek to ensure that national action plans are both ambitious and effective in tackling these challenges. The significance of the OGP in the CEE context underscores its potential to transform governance practices, though the journey is complex and requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. As the initiative progresses, it aims to not only enhance transparency but also improve the overall quality of governance (Laboutková & Vymětal, 2022), thereby making a meaningful impact on citizens' lives and the democratic fabric of the region (Dervin, 1994).

Notably, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region has played a significant role in the OGP's global endeavors. Several countries from this region, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine, have actively participated in the OGP as member countries. Their involvement reflects a shared commitment to embracing transparency and open governance practices, despite the diverse challenges and complexities inherent to their respective political and socio-economic landscapes.

By joining the OGP, these CEE nations have exhibited a readiness to cooperate with civil society organizations, participate in peer learning, and execute action plans customized to their unique situations. This involvement has offered a forum for these states to exchange best practices, tackle shared difficulties, and collaboratively engage in the global discourse on open governance. The primary priority areas in these nations encompassed augmenting public access to information, assuring greater transparency in public expenditure, boosting public integrity, and fostering inclusivity in policymaking processes. Numerous examined CEE nations have underscored the significance of digital governance and the application of technology to enhance accessibility to governmental services and information (Sandoval-Almazán, 2015).

Despite the significant advancements made by these CEE countries (Dowley, 2006), they encountered various hurdles, including inconsistent political will, bureaucratic opposition, and, in certain instances, restricted public involvement. Notwithstanding this, notable accomplishments include the execution of e-governance initiatives, the formation of regulatory agencies to promote accountability, and reforms in public procurement to improve openness. In Estonia, a frontrunner in digital governance, OGP programs consistently prioritize the enhancement of e-services and digital access to governmental data. Although Poland was hesitant to join the OGP, it has achieved progress in citizen engagement by creating platforms that facilitate public involvement in the legislative process.

It has also been observed that there is regional collaboration among CEE countries through OGP frameworks, with governments sharing best practices and lessons learnt. This regional cooperation is crucial as these countries often share similar post-communist transitional challenges and the involvement of CEE countries in the OGP underscores their dedication to reforming governance structures and ensuring that these align more closely with democratic principles and practices (Asian Development Bank, n.d.). This regional cooperation is essential because these countries frequently face comparable post-communist transitional challenges because of their shared

history. The engagement of these individuals not only contributes to the enhancement of domestic policy, but it also elevates their standing on international platforms, bringing them into conformity with the principles of global governance.

The Evolution of Transparency in CEE Countries

Notably, the restoration of public trust is particularly important in the CEE region, where many countries have grappled with legacies of authoritarianism and corruption. By fostering an environment of openness and accountability, transparency initiatives have the potential to heal past wounds, rebuild confidence in governance structures, and pave the way for more inclusive and resilient societies.

As defined by OECD, the term 'Central and Eastern European Countries' (CEECs) refers to a specific group of nations that includes Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. According to OGP's definition, transparency arises when information held by the government (including on activities and decisions) must be open, comprehensive, timely, freely available to the public, and meet basic open data standards (e.g., machine readability, raw data) where formats permit." These commitments reflect a robust engagement with the principles of transparency as outlined by the OGP, involving both the proactive and reactive publication of government-held information, and the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks to support transparency initiatives. Analyzing the following table, we can underline the following:

Country	Albania	Bulgaria	Croatia	Czech Republic	Romania	Slovak Republic	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Member since	2011	2011	2011	2011	2011	2011	2011	2011	2011
No. of AP	6	4	4	6	6	5	6	5	6
No. of commitments	97	92	56	42	87	142	62	51	35
No. of commitments connected to transparency	39	25	33	10	33	42	28	15	9

Source: Author's own table based on OGP public data

All of the above CEE countries joined in 2011 which indicates a collective or regional policy initiative. Also, there is a slight variation in the Number of Action Plans (APs) which could point a sluggish application of their commitment. Apart from Bulgaria and Croatia, which only have 4, most nations have 5 or 6 APs. For example, the Slovak Republic boasts the

highest (142) and Lithuania the lowest (35) among the variations in commitments. This discrepancy could represent variations in policy priorities, capacity, or degree of participation.

In what regards transparency-based assignments while some nations, like Albania (39 out of 97) and Croatia (33 out of 56), commit a sizable share to openness, others, such the Czech Republic (10 out of 42), have a far lesser emphasis on transparency.

Transparency efforts across these countries take various forms, including key initiatives such as:

- **publication of budget or fiscal information** aimed at promoting access to and understanding of government fiscal documentation (budgets, spending reports, etc.), in line with OGP transparency requirements.
- **open contracting** which involves enhancing the transparency of every stage of the public contracting process, including the publication of contracts in an open and accessible format.
- **public procurement** in order to enhance the transparency and integrity of public procurement processes, ensuring that information is openly available.
- **beneficial ownership** which includes policies and measures related to increasing transparency around the true ownership of businesses and entities to prevent corruption and illicit activities (Open Government Partnership, n.d. *Glossary: Beneficial ownership*).
- **right to information** promoting initiatives to improve access to information by strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring the proactive publication of data (Open Government Partnership, n.d. *Glossary: Transparency*).
- **open data** ensuring that government data is open, accessible, and usable by the public, including the application of standards that facilitate the reuse of open data.
- **e-government** and how using of information and communication technologies to enhance access to and delivery of government services to the public, improve transparency.

Country	Hungary	Poland	Slovenia
Member since	2012	**Not a member**	**Not a member**
No. of AP	2	-	-
No. of commitments	16	-	-
No. of commitments connected to transparency	3	-	-

Source: Author's own table based on OGP public data

Hungary joined the OGP in 2012 but has had a limited engagement, completing only two action plans with a total of 16 commitments, of which only three were directly related to transparency. Despite initial efforts, Hungary withdrew from OGP in 2016, citing political disagreements and concerns about external influence (Open Government Partnership, 2016; Budapest Institute, n.d.). Civil society organizations have criticized Hungary's government for failing to prioritize transparency and open governance, particularly as independent oversight institutions have faced increasing restrictions (Transparency International Hungary, 2023). Additionally, recent policy shifts indicate a retreat from open-source initiatives and digital transparency efforts, further limiting public access to government data (Joinup, 2022).

Poland has never been a member of OGP, despite ongoing calls for the country to join. Various reports highlight concerns over democratic backsliding and a lack of institutional support for open governance reforms (OECD, 2021). Civil society organizations and international bodies have urged Poland to adopt OGP principles to improve public trust and government accountability (Open Government Partnership, 2021). However, challenges such as restrictive judicial reforms, decreased press freedom, and government reluctance to increase transparency have hindered progress in this area (Oxygen Foundation, 2021). Despite these setbacks, Poland has made advancements in open data initiatives, ranking among the top countries in certain e-governance indicators (SGI Network, 2022).

Slovenia, like Poland, is not a member of OGP but has demonstrated strong commitments to open government principles. The country ranks among the top five EU nations in terms of public sector data openness, largely due to its proactive policies on digital transparency and public access to information (Government of Slovenia, 2019). Slovenian civil society organizations continue to advocate for the country's OGP

membership, emphasizing the need for broader public participation in governance (Mirovni Institute, 2014). Furthermore, Slovenia's active participation in international transparency discussions, such as the 2023 OGP Global Summit, highlights its commitment to open governance despite its non-member status (UNCAC Coalition, 2023).

When it comes to open data initiatives, Korea, France, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, Denmark, Sweden, and Lithuania are the top 10 performing nations (in that order). In the OECD methodology, these governments (Government Transformation, n.d.) receive reasonably high scores in each of the three pillars: *data accessibility* - measuring the proportion of high-value open datasets that are available through a central open data portal*, data availability* - evaluating whether a nation has an open data strategy, and government support for data reuse such as data promotion campaigns and data literacy initiatives (Laboutková et. al., 2020).

In other words, it is not only the publication of the data, it is also the we must make an exercise in the use of social media, as advocated by Andrea Di Maio (Eaves, 2009). The first element that has to be included into the open government scenario is the maximization of the link between government and people via modern communication technologies suggests first and mostly a cultural shift (Onufreiciuc, 2022).

An open relationship between citizens is not the same thing as an open relationship between citizens. In one model, the inhabitants know what the government has done in a time-lagged asynchrony of events; at best, their alternative of interactivity is limited to that allowed by the medium used, sending back their opinions by post. In the other case, time is significantly reduced: the possibility of exchanging information and interacting rapidly significantly strengthens participation and enriches the citizen-governor relationship (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014; Government Transformation, n.d.).

Open Government must not only set performance guidelines in its definitions and objectives, it must also be clear in suggesting instruments for implementation. Any instrument applied must answer to the most crucial goal of the Open Government model: to center the citizen in the administration of the state (Onufreiciuc, 2022). The design of forms that maximize public administration's procedures should be motivated by great vocation to serve the needs of every user-citizen (Ungureanu & Nemțoi, 2022). It is necessary to clarify that comfort, in this case, is not understood in the sense of distancing oneself from the effort, but as a synonym of friendliness of the administration with its constituents (World Bank, n.d.). Convenience, for example, in not wasting time and effort in tasks such as

the payment of taxes, obtaining licences, appointments, consultations, certifications, validations, authorisations, documentations, etc. Moreover, the tools used must not only be practical, but also easy to appropriate. To paraphrase Marshal McLuhan "if the recipients do not naturally adapt to them, if they do not adopt them as extensions of their own body, the model of openness used is destined to fail" (Farnam Street, n.d.).

The administrative and political framework of a government must be networked, understood as the most qualified form of computer interconnection, in which access protocols are established both for the participating user and for the competent officials of all the organisations (OECD, 2021; Onufreiciuc, 2022). A noteworthy aspect applicable to the reality of current information systems is that a massive network already exists, and there is a certainty of need on public issues (Eaves, 2009). The Open Government presence should be built on that network, as a way of responding to the requests of those who debate there. And from that same space, links with civil organisations, businesses, trade unions, universities and foundations should be promoted in order to strengthen participation (Open Government Partnership, n.d.).

Training civil servants and public officials in the use of these linking instruments is another inevitable step on the road to Open Government (Onufreiciuc, 2022). It is vital to emphasise that only a new service culture, built from a clear position in favour of the interests of citizens and their more comfortable and friendly relationship with the state, will make it possible for Open Government to function properly (Transparency International Hungary, 2023). Once this space for the empowerment of the public agent has been created, the destiny of popular participation can be challenged. We must bear in mind that every word, every message received from citizens' demands, arrives without daily intervention, without political translation (Ungureanu & Nemţoi, 2022). Concerns and proposals are introduced into a universe of digital democracy where everyone has an authorised opinion. This is a real participatory agenda in which, without a doubt, those governments that do not satisfy requests and demands will be put in a tight spot, but which will also substantially improve those that carry out this step with excellence.

In the same manner, and applying this concept to the citizen-civil servant connection in an Open Government model, we may claim that anyone once examines the advantages of this collaborative structure will not want to return to the frustrating forms of the traditional regular bureaucratic state machinery (the author of informatics issues and sociologist Jose L. Brea created the phrase *Ahora todos somos Ram*, synthesising with this a change in

the cultural paradigm of today's society) (Onufreiciuc, 2022; OECD AI Policy Observatory, n.d.).

It is, therefore, very important to make clear that, in my opinion, the concept of Open Government: it can only be applied to processes in more democratic systems. It has as its main objective and essence the improvement of democracy; it has as its main objective and essence the improvement of democracy; it promotes values such as transparency and citizen participation and collaboration in public decision-making; it is based on permanent dialogue, for which permanent beta states on the part of stakeholders and open data processes are essential; it needs strong and decisive leadership and it involves organisational and cultural changes in administrations.

Conclusions

Transparency is, as we have seen, the fundamental part of an Open Government. To be open, one needs to follow a methodical approach that may be reused rather than merely broadcast facts. This goal drives data sharing with a standard so that anybody may create services providing more information that can be utilized both to monitor government activity and help to contribute to it. Governments have to be understandable and responsible to the people who participate in their policies; the public sector has to be open and transparent. Governments have to be understandable and accountable to the people who have to be involved in their policies; the public sector has to be open and transparent.

Government policies and services center the citizen most of the time, thus they have to be given top priority throughout political decisions. This means that government actions, including decision-making, service organization and provision, and the publishing of rules, laws, and regulations, should be carried out with the citizen in mind, so enabling them to participate, voice their opinions, engage in dialogue, express their discontent, and vote. This is the point at which technology either facilitates or becomes a required component of the interaction mechanisms.

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