

[Help in Communication or a Bureaucratic Maze?]

Online Communication of the Satu Mare County Council and Local Councils

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Abstract (*Help in Communication or a Bureaucratic Maze? Online Communication of the Satu Mare County Council and Local Councils*)

Our analysis focuses on the online communication of the Satu-Mare County Council and the Local Councils. This overview covers the ongoing political cycle starting from 2016 and examines the communication of the county council and of the local council of the city through the online means. The analysis itself is preceded by a brief theoretical overview presenting the current legal framework governing the online communication of the Romanian public institutions, which will be one of the main criteria of comparison of our analysis. Then we review the regulations providing online access to the Romanian public institutions, as well as the recommendations underlying the organization of the communication, accessibility and transparency of these institutions.

Keywords *online communication; website; local council; public administration*

Rezumat (*Sprrijin pentru comunicare sau un labirint birocratic? Comunicarea online a Consiliului Județean Satu Mare și a municipiilor sătmărene*)

În centrul analizei noastre prezente se află comunicarea online a județului Satu Mare și a municipiului Satu Mare, precum și a municipiilor din județ. Analiza propriu zisă, bazată pe situația din 2019, este precedată de o scurtă prezentare teoretică privind cadrul legal actual referitor la comunicarea online a instituțiilor publice din România, unul din principalele criterii comparative ale analizei. În continuarea studiului sunt enumerate reglementările care asigură accesul online al cetățenilor la căile de comunicare online a instituțiilor publice din România și recomandările pe baza cărora sunt organizate comunicarea, accesibilitatea și transparența efectivă a acestor instituții.

Cuvinte cheie *comunicare online, site web, administrație locală, administrație publică*

The focus of this study is the online communication of the local councils in Satu-Mare county. The purpose of studying the websites operated by the County Council of Satu-Mare, as well as by the local councils of the county seat and the other towns is to better and more thoroughly understand how and to what extent social media is able to serve the public's need for information and, at the same time, to ensure the transparency of the administration. Furthermore, we can also get a clear picture of the current stage of implementation of e-administration at local council level. After examining the materials used for this study, we will have

a deep understanding of the challenges and difficulties the relationship between social media and the public institutions is facing. This is a complex relationship, since the websites of the local councils need to comply at the same time with the legal requirements, the principle of utility and transparency and the concept of user-friendly interface for data provision and contact (Nica et al 2014. 157). As a first step of our study, we will review the legal requirements that govern the communication of the state-funded institutions.

The legal framework applicable to the online communication of the Romanian public institutions is:

- Art. 31 of the Romanian constitution¹ on the right to information
- Law 544/2001 on free access to information of public interest
- The methodological guidelines regarding Law 2001/544, published on February 7th, 2002
- Law 52/2003 on the decisional transparency in the public administration and the closely related Law 161/2003 on certain measures for ensuring transparency in the exercise of public dignities, public functions and the business environment, and for the prevention and sanction of corruption. The latter two helped Romania to join the European Union.
- The “E-Romania” national strategy, whose primary goal is to digitalize public administration²
- Law 215/2001 on public administration, designed to regulate the operation of local public administration

The background and international basis of all these legal provisions is the Lisbon Treaty, the cornerstone of the operation of the European Union. Furthermore, around twenty official documents, law amendments, changes and supplements, as well as the methodological guidelines thereof regulate the provisions regarding the online communication of local public administration institutions.

The subject of this study on online communication is the communication through the official websites of the Satu-Mare County Council, of the local councils of the two municipalities within the county, i.e. Satu-Mare and Carei, as well as of the local councils of four other towns within the county, namely Negrești-Oaș, Tășnad, Livada, and Arduș.

The basis of comparison for the research process comprises primary and secondary criteria (Kádár, Benedek 2018. 247). The primary criteria are set out in Law 544/2001 and refer to the free access to information of public interest:

- publication of the organizational chart of the institution, including its competences and departments, as well as the rules of operation of these departments (art. 5 of Law 544/2001)
- contact information of the registration office or of the office that records appeals (address, phone number, e-mail address, availability), as well as the online availability of the virtual registration tool (art. 8/4 of Law 544/2001)

- online access to information of public interest through e-mail, as well as the online collection of reports and feedbacks on the operation of the website
- publication of the financial report for the previous year. The balance-sheet is mostly accessible, and is usually incomplete or lacks the supporting documents for the quarterly budget implementation review that reviews the budget implementation, refers to the budget adjustments and is required by the local authorities (art. 8 and 73 of Law 273/2006, amended in 2018)
- publication of the urban development strategy that also includes the current year, presentation of the development programs (art. 5 of Law 544/2001)
- Publication in the Official Journal and on the website of the yearly newsletter (art. 5 of Law 544/2001 and Law 52/2003)
- since public institutions are required to hold periodic, but at least monthly press conferences, the archive of press events, as well as their timeline and calendar (art. 17 and art. 19/1 of Law 544/2001), as well as the archive of the minutes of these press conferences.
- timeline of events of public interest (art. 17 and art. 19/1 of Law 544/2001), calendar of events
- information and contact details of the Office of Data of Public Interest³ and the Press Relations Office (methodology related to art. 6, 7 and 8 of Law 544/2001, as well as art. 6 of Government Ordinance no. 27/2002)
- official notification of the date and time, venue and agenda of the public council meetings (art. 7 and 8 of Law 52/2003)

The list of secondary criteria:

- publication of the identification features of the town related to the national symbols (Law 75/1994)
- publication of the list of councilors including their name, picture, biography and property statement
- publication of the communication strategy and plan for the town, presentation of the visual design features of the town
- whether the local council have a press spokesperson or a press department, and it is accessible for the public
- chronological presentation of the events open for the press and public access to the related archives
- easy access to the public utility services reporting to the institution (Law 161/2003)
- compatibility of the standard forms that can be accessed and downloaded on the website with other applications used by the users, as well as the existence of a guide for the filling out and a description thereof
- are there social media, Facebook, Instagram or Youtube channels linked to the website, and how does the institution communicate through these channels.

Since Satu-Mare is a border region with a significant presence of ethnic minorities, it is particularly important for our study to examine the attitude of the selected towns toward multilingualism: whether the town's official website is available in the language of the local ethnic groups, is it operational or there are only a few static headers available in those languages. Furthermore, we examine whether the town is engaged in multilingual communication, and whether it also uses the social media channels for this purpose. The basis of this study is the ethnic map of the county and towns.

Fig. 1.1 Ethnic Map of Satu-Mare Bounty⁴ based on the 2011 Census

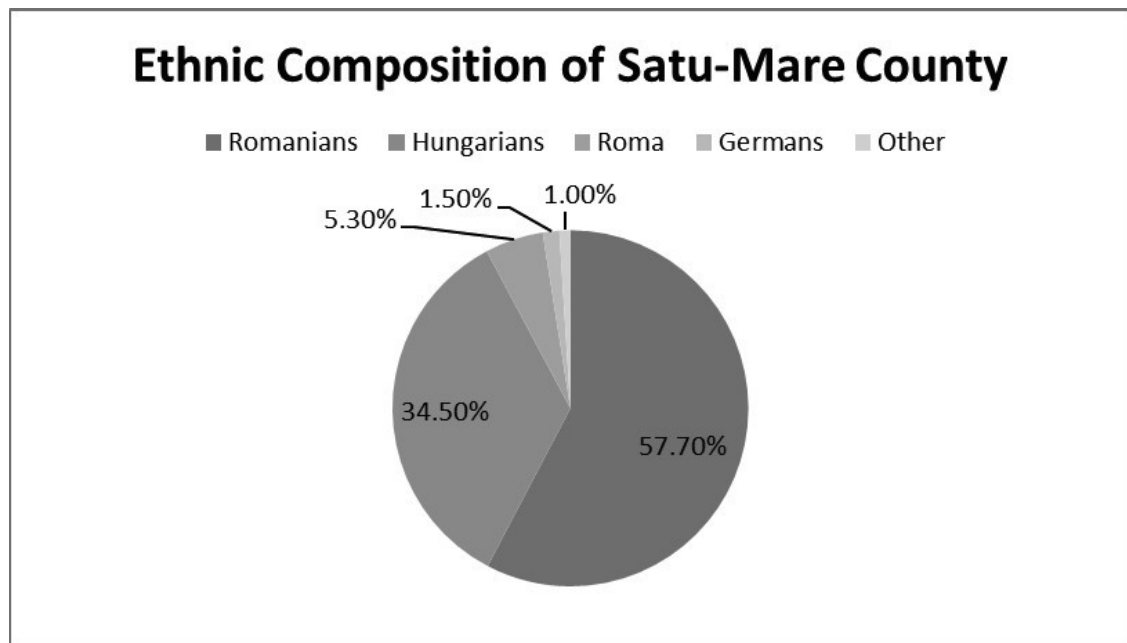


Fig. 1.2 Status and Ethnic Composition of the Towns Covered by the Study⁵

Ethnic composition of the population, in percentages ⁶									
Official Romanian Name	Hungarian Name	Town Status	Population According to the 2011 Census	Romanians	Hungarians	Roma	Germans	Other	Not stated
Satu-Mare	Szatmárnémeti	municipality ⁷	102,411	54.2	34.61	1.24	1.02	8.62	0.31
Carei	Nagykároly	municipality	21,112	38.25	51.86	2.18	2.26	0.14	5.27
Negrești-Oaș	Avasfelsőfalu	Town	11,867	77.99	2.34	1.56	* ⁸	0.22	17.86
Tășnad	Tasnád	Town	8,631	49.46	34.79	11.03	*	0.92	3.78

Livada	Sárköz- újlak	Town	6,773	34.48	59.53	3.11	*	0.39	2.46
Ardud	Erdőd	Town	6,231	55.35	17.52	15.34	4.47	0.09	7.2

Methodology:

The subject of our study are the official websites of the Satu-Mare County Council and of the towns within the county. The study covers the entire last week of March 2019. We selected a relatively calm, eventless period, before the campaign for the European Parliament elections due that year began. We compiled the variables of the study based on Law 544/2001 (Kádár 2014: 45) and added some factors we considered important for the purposes of our analysis, related to language use and use of social media. We classified our analysis criteria into so-called *hard* and *soft* categories: the former examines the compliance with the legal framework, while the latter analyses the websites of the given institution from the perspective of efficient communication. When we compiled the soft category we referred to Magor Kádár's similar study (Kádár 2014), which places the emphasis on the transparency and availability of published information, as well as to the document 'Guide to the Online Communication of the Ministry of Communication and Information Society' (2008). Using the demographics data presented we are seeking to find out whether the institutions subject to the study have a website enabling communication in the languages of the local ethnic minorities in accordance with Law 215/2001 on public administration and whether they use the languages of these minorities in their social media communications.

The summary of the primary, criteria-based analysis of the websites is shown in Fig. 1.3. When examining the websites of the Satu-Mare County Council (hereinafter: The Council) and of the towns subject to the study, we also monitored the versions of multilingualism that consider the ethnic composition of the town. The website of the Council is available in Romanian and Hungarian, although the Hungarian version is far behind the original Romanian version in terms of content. The website that best reflects the European values, the ethnic composition and tourism objectives of the town is the website of Satu-Mare, which is supposed to be available in four languages: Romanian, Hungarian, English and German. Unfortunately, there is virtually no information uploaded in the latter two languages, rendering these versions unusable, and thus we disregarded them in our analysis. But at least the intent is there, as the English and German version can be uploaded anytime with the proper content. After a more thorough examination we had to conclude that the Hungarian version isn't better either, since only the main menu and a few menu options were translated into Hungarian. In the case of Carei, the Romanian website is also available in Hungarian, although, just like the Council's website, it contains far less information and, moreover, apart from the main menu being available in Hungarian, there was no information under the various menu options, as the visitor is greeted with "*This category is empty!*" Unfortunately, the official websites of the local councils of the other towns are only available in Romanian, which is only acceptable for Negrești-Oaș. The local council of Ardud uses a built-in

Google translator, which makes it mainly incomprehensible and comical in places, which is really detrimental to the prestige of the local council.

In the summary table below the following notations are used:

- ✓ the criterion is partly or fully present on the website
- the Romanian version is shown under the menu option
- the criterion is present on the website, but it does not work when clicked

For the sections where there's no indication whatsoever, the criterion is considered not present.

	Criterion	SMCCW		Satu-Mare		Carei		Negrești-Oaş	Tășnad	Livada	Ardud
		RO	HU	RO	HU	RO	HU	RO	RO	RO	RO
1	Organizational chart	✓	✓	✓	•	✓			✓	✓	✓
2	Availability of the registration office, online registration tool			✓	✓						
3	Information of public interest	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
4	Financial report for the previous year			✓		✓					✓
5	Urban development strategy	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
6	Annual report							✓		✓	✓
7	Archive, chronological	✓		✓					✓		✓
8	Calendar of events	○	○								
9	Public Relations Office			✓	✓					✓	
10	Public meetings, data and time and agenda of meetings	✓	✓	✓						✓	
11	Symbols, coats of arms	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
12	Introduction of councilors, biographies	✓	•	✓	○			✓	✓	✓	
13	Communication strategy, design	✓	•								

14	Press room										
15	Standard forms	✓	•	✓		✓		✓		✓	
16	Public utility service: information, availability	✓	•	✓	✓						
17	Integrated social media (Facebook)	✓	•			✓		✓	✓		

Fig. 1.3 Criteria-based Analysis of the Websites

The criteria considered and the results of the comparison of the selected websites are summarized in Fig. 1.3. Based on the analysis of the websites it can be concluded that the websites of the Council, of Satu-Mare and of Livada are modern, offer a pleasant visual experience and provide an insight into the real life of the community, while the other websites could be criticized for their outdated look, static structure and obsolete visual design.

The websites that best comply with the legal framework are the websites of the Council, of Satu-Mare and of Livada, since they comply with most of the legal criteria, although these websites have plenty of shortcomings as well. As a general remark, we can conclude that although the websites of the Council and of Satu-Mare are available for Hungarian-speaking users, in terms of content, up-to-date information and databases these versions are far behind the Romanian versions. Many menu options are not accessible at all, some only display the Romanian version, while in other cases only the title of the main menu and the related submenus are translated. Since the table shows exactly the presence or absence of certain criteria also broken down by language, we will not address this issue in more detail. Fig. 1.3 indicates the absence of an online registration tool, which refers to the fact that there is no virtual client support and no virtual assistance. Clients are unable to upload online the documents and data required for the management of their complaints and matters, so they have no other option but to turn to a clerk. This means that they have to physically go to the office. With a few exceptions we couldn't find any built-in event calendars on the websites. We only found one on the Council's website, both in Romanian and Hungarian, but it wasn't operational. It was merely a monthly calendar, nothing else. We could only find a detailed presentation of the communication strategy on the Council's website, while the design book comprising the visual design elements was not present on any of them. Similarly, in none of the instances were we able to find any references to any contact with the press or a built-in press room.

The 1.3 figure above summarizes all the strengths and weaknesses of the analyzed websites. Based on these analyses and further research, we should sadly admit the fact, that although it was obligatory by laws, none of the analyzed websites fulfill as a whole the criteria of communication of the local public government. The empty rows point out the indifference of the authorities towards

the population. The smaller the settlement, the more significant the shortcomings in the online communication of the local public government. Could this fact be attributed to the lack of money or simply political indifference? Or simply they use a more comfortable and popular domain, the social media?

Social media. Complementary or competition?

Except Livada and Ardud, all local councils are present in the social media, especially Facebook. The Council⁹ delivers its communication in Romanian and focuses on the presentation of the most important cultural and social events. The page has 2822 followers, which, considering the population of the county, is rather low. The local council of Satu-Mare is much more active on Facebook and has 11,269 followers. This active page featuring a high-quality visual display, bilingual communication in every instance, and in some cases even in English¹⁰ aims to maintain live contact with the public. It is used to publish real events, notifications, invitations and official statements. The page actively uses the visual design elements of the local council introduced in 2018, which include the trilingual logo of the local council. The local council of Carei moved from the website to Facebook, and its online communication is characterized by dynamism, as well as publication of up-to-date information and official statements. The page is in Romanian and has 7344 followers. The official website of the town includes the integrated link to its Instagram account, although the local council is less active on this platform. The Facebook page of Negrești-Oaș¹¹ is primarily used to document events, as well as cultural and social activities, and only to a small degree to maintain live contact with the public. The page of the town of Tășnad has 8601 members¹² and operates as a closed group, as any request to join must be approved by the page administrators. The page is characterized by an active, bottom-up communication, and is mainly used to publish the day to day issues of the public. Although the towns of Livada and Ardud are present in the online media, none of these pages is operated by the local councils, therefore they are irrelevant for our analysis.

Conclusions:

The analysis of the websites raises many other issues in addition to our criteria, which must be addressed to ensure the public is properly informed. In most cases the websites seem to comply with the legal requirements, however this fact in itself is not always enough to support the real flow of information. By simply uploading in PDF format the resolutions, legal requirements and strategy plans that use administrative language and are in themselves complicated will not help the public looking for practical information.

The smaller the town, the less the emphasis on the full compliance with the legal requirements and tends to have a website with an outdated design, as well as an incomplete and obsolete structure and content. At the same time, we have to mention the menu options and information required to meet the need for convenience and information of the public and the possible tourists and investors. A presentation with some images of the history, major events and investment

opportunities of the town is important, no doubt, and serves the interest of the local community.

The unconditional compliance with the legal requirements remains a priority, although this acts as an inhibiting factor on user-friendly websites. Citizens want transparent, easy to use and user-friendly websites that enable them to solve their matters easily and quickly using the clear guidance of the menu options. Addressing the deficiencies found by our study is a basic legal requirement, but first we recommend websites meeting the current standards to be set up in Carei, Negrești-Oaș, Tășnad, and Ardud. A virtual, online registration tool would greatly facilitate the management of matters of the public, but would also save time, free up staff capacity, as well as accelerate and simplify the administration. Quick and easy online access to services subject to state supervision can make the relationship between local authorities and the public more transparent and efficient, thus greatly improving the living standards of the local community. Integration of the various channels of social media can expand the experience provided by the official website, especially when it comes to cultural, social, sporting and business events. Revitalization and development of tourism is gaining an ever-increasing importance in the activity of the local councils and implicitly in the life of the local communities, therefore the emphasis on it and a more complete visual experience can be important to each stakeholder. Data provision by the local council adapted to the communication habits of the public will improve the efficiency of sharing information with the public.

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Endnotes

1 This article was enacted on 21 November 1991, was further amended in 2003, and was published in its current form on 31 October 2003 in the Official Journal of Romania

2 Government Ordinance No. 195/2010

3 Public Information Office

4 The total population according to the 2011 census was 329,079, but according to the population data of the Institute of Statistics (www.satumare.insse.ro), as at early July 2018, the total population was 387,979

5 www.satumare.insse.ro

6 The last column includes the percentage of people who did not state their ethnicity at the census.

7 The status of *municipality* is granted to towns with a population exceeding 15,000. In Satu-Mare county there are two municipalities, and Satu-Mare is also the county seat.

8 in towns marked with an asterisk there is no German or Swabian population on record, or their percentage is so low that when the 2011 census data were aggregated, the Institute of Statistics included them in the *Others* category

9 <https://www.facebook.com/cjasm.ro/>

10 <https://www.facebook.com/primariasatumare/>

11 <https://www.facebook.com/OrasulNegrestiOas/>

12 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/orasultasnad.ro/>