

CITIZENS' FREE ACCESS TO INFORMATION. THE CASE OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONS FROM RURAL AREAS OF THE NORTH-WESTERN REGION FROM ROMANIA

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which local authorities in rural North-West Romania adhere to the requirements set forth in Law no. 544 of 2001, which mandates the *ex officio* public information disclosure online. The findings suggest a relatively low level of transparency, with notable discrepancies observed across communes. While larger communes exhibited slightly elevated levels of compliance, population size exerted a limited influence on transparency. Additionally, the study revealed no statistically significant correlation between the gender of mayors and transparency. This may be attributed to the limited representation of female mayors in the sample. Similarly, while the presence of businesses demonstrated some influence on transparency, it was not a robust predictor. These findings underscore the necessity for more robust enforcement mechanisms, including penalties for non-compliance, to guarantee compliance with transparency laws. Furthermore, the study highlights the necessity of considering a broader array of factors, including local governance practices, institutional capacity, and citizen engagement, when evaluating transparency outcomes. It would be beneficial for future research to expand to other regions and consider a longitudinal approach to monitor changes over time. The study underscores the pivotal role of transparency in cultivating public trust, curbing corruption, and strengthening democratic governance.

Keywords: free access to information, rural public authorities, Law no. 544/2001, *ex officio*, access to information, transparency.

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a notable decline in credibility and public trust in public institutions. In response to this trend access to public information, mainly through online disclosure, has been identified as a key mechanism for improving public authorities' transparency and restoring public confidence (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 354). Free access to information has become a fundamental belief of effective governance, enabling citizens to assess and evaluate the efficacy of governmental actions. It functions as a conduit through which citizens can enhance their capacity to oversee public authorities' operations, engage actively in decision-making processes, and exert influence over the accountability of authorities. The provision of information, both proactively and upon request, establishes a communicative context between citizens and public authorities. In this context, citizens repose trust in the authorities, and the authorities demonstrate interest and respect for citizens (Deaconu, 2003).

Democratic states must prioritize the protection of individual rights, including the right to information. This right was initially recognized in Swedish legislation in 1766. Many other states only began to implement laws based on this right relatively recently: Finland in 1951, United States in 1966, Denmark and Norway in 1970, France and the Netherlands in 1978, Australia and New Zealand in 1982, Canada one year later (1983), and Colombia in 1985 (Mendel, 2009, pp. 24–25). From 1766 to 1990, 14 countries had laws governing access to information. A decade later, an additional 25 states enacted similar legislation, and between 2001 and 2019, an additional 86 states adopted laws related to the right of access to information (UNESCO, 2019, p. 8). Following the dissolution of the communist regimes in Europe, numerous countries in the region enacted legislation to facilitate access to information. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria are among the countries that introduced such laws. In 1989, Romania became a democratic state and its new democratic Constitution, adopted in 1991 (Romanian Constitution, 1991), embedded the right to information in Article no. 31. Subsequently, in 2001, legislation was enacted to guarantee free access to information (Law no. 544). European countries have considerable experience in the enactment of legislation pertaining to the right of access to public information, with nearly all having passed relevant laws. In Europe, Western European countries were among the first to introduce legislation in this area. However, it is in the same countries that proactive online disclosure laws are most limited in scope (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 368).

International organizations that advocate for greater government transparency have urged countries to adopt legal frameworks for public access to information (Neuman, 2006). These global pressures, along with technological advances, have led to the widespread adoption of access to information laws that require the online disclosure of public data. As most activities now take place online and artificial intelligence continues to develop, technology has become an integral part of human life. As a result, interacting with public institutions via the Internet is now standard practice, as ICTs enable proactive dissemination of information, thereby expanding public access. In recent years, legislation

has increasingly prioritized the proactive online disclosure of information, recognizing the widespread benefits it offers. Enhanced proactive disclosure markedly fosters transparency by facilitating easier access to information for citizens, eliminating obstacles such as the necessity to submit formal requests, reducing waiting periods, and frequently reducing reprographic costs. Proactive online disclosure not only benefits citizens by facilitating easier and cost-free access to information but also alleviates the burden on public bodies by reducing the volume of information requests they must respond to, as the information is already available.

This study aims to assess the level of compliance with *ex officio* disclosure laws and to rank local authorities on the basis of their compliance and to identify factors that influence citizens' access to public information. By examining the impact of population size, gender of the mayor, and business presence, the research seeks to provide insights into the drivers of transparency at the local level in rural Romania, an under-researched area. The focus is on the disclosure of public information by local authorities, as required by Romanian Law no. 544/2001. The research assesses whether local authorities fulfill their legal obligation to provide information through their official websites, which are crucial platforms for the dissemination of public information (Jaeger and Bertot, 2010, p. 374).

The first hypothesis examines whether larger population size is positively associated with higher *ex officio* compliance by local authorities, with the aim of clarifying how population influences transparency levels. The second hypothesis examines whether female-led communes have higher compliance level than male-led communes, focusing on gender as a factor of high disclosure of public information. The third hypothesis tests whether a higher presence of businesses correlates with greater *ex officio* compliance, suggesting that areas with more business activity may demand greater transparency from local authorities, which may influence compliance due to interests in taxation, public projects, and the bidding process. To achieve the proposed objectives, a content grid analysis and regression models were used to examine the influence of specific factors on how well local authorities comply with their legal obligations regarding public access to information.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Main concepts

Access to public information is a fundamental right that facilitates oversight and accountability by enabling transparency and allowing for the scrutiny and evaluation of public authorities' actions and it functions as a mechanism for public auditing and citizen participation. Also, it is a critical component of democratic governance, and a key instrument in promoting transparency (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 355).

Although some authors define transparency as the dissemination of information and documents by local public authorities on their websites for citizens to access (Tejedo-Romero and Ferraz Esteves Araujo, 2023, p. 2), we consider access to information

to be only one aspect of transparency as other authors in the field consider that access to information is a condition of transparency and openness of administration (Birkinshaw, 2001, p. 1 *apud* Dragoş and Neamţu, 2011, p. 150). Transparency is regarded as the most crucial instrument for combating corruption, which frequently impedes economic growth (Manan *et al.*, 2022, p. 2090) or the development of countries. It is also seen as a means of reducing unethical practices at the level of public authorities, fostering greater receptivity, ethical governance and engagement with citizens (Musa, Bebic and Durman, 2015, p. 417). It is widely accepted that transparency is best achieved through a robust legal framework, with the implementation of the law being of primary importance. This is because it is essential for public authorities to implement the laws and for citizens to adhere to them. Transparency is the provision of information by public authorities to citizens through various instruments, including communication and access to public information (Musa, Bebic and Durman, 2015, pp. 451–422). This information is intended to be useful to citizens while also serving the dual purpose of protecting human rights and ensuring the applicability of the law. Furthermore, it is associated with access to information of public interest (Giménez-Chornet, 2012; Borghetti, 2007 *apud* Sandu, 2016, p. 61).

From our perspective, transparency is also achieved through the use of e-government. This is the result of the administration's demonstrated interest in communicating effectively and directly with the citizens, with e-government tools being a significant contributing factor. The use of the Internet by public institutions to disseminate information shows a growing interest in adapting the administration to the current context and to changes in society. The advent of digitalization has provided a novel avenue for enhancing transparency and bolstering anti-corruption endeavors at the level of public institutions. A considerable number of countries that have enacted transparency legislation have explicitly linked its enforcement to the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT)-based initiatives (Relly and Sabharwal, 2009). The use of online communication has the potential not only to reduce corruption but also to promote good governance and facilitate the development of numerous initiatives aimed at reforming the system (Shim and Eom, 2008). The use of information and communication technologies by states is regarded as a mean of enhancing efficiency, promoting transparency, reducing corruption and fostering competition (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010, p. 265). In this regard, some individuals are not concerned about privacy invasion and tend to trust internet information more than personal interactions (Cuillier and Piotrowski, 2009, p. 443). This suggests that the use of the internet by public institutions should become a standard practice.

Given the digital era's influence, public institutions must align their services with citizens' needs by offering effective online services. In this manner, public authorities become more accessible to citizens, encourage greater participation and transparency (Kim and Lee, 2012), and reduce the level of corruption (Welch, Hinnant and Moon, 2005; Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010, p. 265) by providing online services (Cruz *et al.*, 2016, p. 868). Moreover, in recent years, public authorities have utilized their websites to disseminate

information about their activities and to facilitate greater citizen engagement, while also meeting their legal obligations (Holzer and Kim, 2004, p. 391 *apud* Piotrowski and Borry, 2009). The provision of online information led to an increase in the transparency of public authorities, as citizens are interested in monitoring the activities of the authorities (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). Furthermore, the OECD advocates a principle of proactive disclosure, which stipulates that information must be accessible to citizens prior to their request for it (this is what is referred to as *ex officio* information). In this way, the dissemination of information via online channels fosters a closer relationship between public authorities and citizens, encourages greater involvement, and facilitates greater transparency (OECD, 2011, pp. 142–144).

The principles of transparency, information access, and dissemination are regarded as fundamental tenets of public administration (Piotrowsky, 2010). A high level of transparency is beneficial to openness, accountability, communication with citizens, participation in decision-making, and civic engagement. Likewise, access to information enables individuals to exercise their rights, thereby fostering awareness and responsibility among both citizens and public institutions (Musa, Bebic and Durman, 2015, p. 415). In democratic states, public trust is vital, and transparency plays a key role in fostering confidence in public institutions by ensuring a fair and impartial administrative process devoid of corruption (Tejedo-Romero and Ferraz Esteves Araujo, 2023, p. 1).

The global concept of freedom of information is commonly referred to as FOIA (Freedom of Information Act). This term is utilized in reports that encompass data regarding the implementation of the right to information across diverse jurisdictions. The European Union has endorsed the necessity of such a law, citing the right to information as a means of combating corruption. As a member state of the European Union, Romania is bound by the same obligations as other member states regarding free access to information; this is intended to enhance public trust in public authorities and to reduce corruption. This legislation applies to all public institutions in Romania. In Romania, reports of FOIA are mandatory and include a variety of indicators in accordance with the adopted legislation.

‘*Ex officio* communication’ refers to the proactive sharing of information by government agencies without citizen requests, which promotes transparency and fosters trust between government and citizens. By regularly disclosing data on operations, decisions, and finances, government agencies reduce the risk of abuse of power and enhance public oversight. This transparency is critical to prevent corruption because it increases the likelihood that wrongdoing will be detected. An informed public is more likely to participate in decision-making and civic activities, strengthening democracy and empowering citizens. It would be beneficial for all if public institutions were to demonstrate their commitment to legal obligations and European standards. This legislation could play an important role in fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and participation in governance.

2.2. *The importance of transparency and access to information*

It seems that there is an increasing importance being placed on the accessibility of information of public interest, the methods of communication and the manner of availability of said information, for public authorities. This prompts public authorities to become more active regarding their website's activity and visibility, including the provision of updated information. Furthermore, it encourages public authorities to become more involved in the community, to establish better relations and contact with citizens, and, most importantly, to enhance citizens' confidence in authorities (Piotrowski and Borry, 2009, p. 391). Furthermore, it can enhance the efficacy and quality of public authorities' actions, thereby increasing their administrative capacity (Radu and Dragoş, 2019, p. 426). The efficiency of public authorities and the motivation of citizens to engage in participatory activities are also regarded as indicators of progress (Schmidhuber *et al.*, 2021 *apud* Tejedo-Romero and Ferraz Esteves Araujo, 2023, p. 1).

The effective right to access public information has been demonstrated to enhance public trust in civil servants and to strengthen their legitimacy and it is regarded as a citizen's entitlement, rather than merely an obligation of public institutions, given the importance of ensuring public awareness of the activities of these authorities. Also, it has been shown to offer additional benefits across a range of domains, for example in the political sphere, transparency serves as the foundation of representative democracy, enabling citizens to monitor their elected officials (Meijer, 2015, p. 189). The evidence suggests that citizens who are better informed are more likely to engage with governmental activities, including participating in elections and demanding accountability (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 354). From an economic perspective, the accessibility of public information fosters a climate of trust among investors, as market developments are closely intertwined with the availability of reliable information (Islam, 2006, p. 141).

Several theoretical frameworks have been developed with the aim of explaining the process of information disclosure within the public sector. One such framework is 'agency theory' (Zimmerman, 1977, p. 135), which posits that public institutions utilize online information disclosure as a mechanism to reduce information asymmetry and mitigate institutional conflicts. From the perspective of legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), public managers disclose online information regarding the government's management and financial situation for the purpose of mitigating the potential negative effects of budget cuts, preventing or addressing legitimacy crises, and preserving the country's credit rating (Serrano, Rueda and Portillo, 2009; Alcaide-Muñoz, Rodrigues-Bolivar and Lopez-Hernandez, 2016 *apud* Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 357). Similarly, 'institutional theory' (Carpenter and Feroz, 2001, pp. 592–593) suggests that governments are subject to external pressures and evolving trends, which compel them to adopt management practices and rules that are perceived as legitimate and socially acceptable. The practice of online information disclosure has become widely accepted, influenced by historical, economic, political, socio-organizational, institutional, and cultural factors (Bakar and Saleh, 2015; Alcaide-Muñoz, Rodrigues-Bolivar and Lopez-Hernandez,

2016 *apud* Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 356). Most studies treat disclosed information as a dependent variable, but often don't distinguish between legally required and voluntarily disclosed data.

In contrast to private sector research, few studies focus on the factors that influence public organizations' decisions about online disclosure (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and Caba-Perez, 2017, p. 357). The legal environment and internal structure of public organizations influence mandatory disclosure practices. Transparency empowers public bodies and promotes stakeholder engagement in communities with transparent governance (Porumbescu, 2015, p. 3).

2.3. Aspects that influence transparency and access to information

In light of the existing literature, it seems that the transparency of political institutions is shaped by a multitude of political, economic, and societal factors. These factors can be classified into two categories. Firstly, supply-side determinants pertain to the characteristics of the political representatives themselves; the fundamental premise is that the nature of political leadership directly impacts governance outcomes and the extent to which political bodies disclose information. The second group comprises demand-side determinants, which encompass the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the population governed by the political body which indicate that specific attributes of civil society exert greater influence on political institutions, prompting them to adopt more transparent governance practices (Zagrapan and Spac, 2022, p. 1349). In our study we choose both supply determinants (gender of the mayor) and demand side determinants (population size and number of businesses).

Population size is one of the most frequently utilized variables in transparency research due to its reflection of the scale and complexity of a municipality's operations, as well as the pressure it faces in governance and resource allocation (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2011). Empirical studies have demonstrated that larger municipalities, which manage more substantial budgets, are subjected to greater pressure to explore alternative methods of public service provision and engage in more robust information disclosure practices (Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera and Ortiz-Rodriguez, 2015, p. 86). As the population grows, it seems that there is an increasing demand for transparency. Larger governments are more visible and accountable to a wider range of stakeholders, including citizens, businesses, and civil society. Moreover, both public and private sector organizations tend to disclose a greater quantity of information voluntarily as their size increases (Gallego-Álvarez, Rodríguez-Domínguez and García Sánchez, 2011, p. 378). Also, it was demonstrated that population size is a significant factor influencing the effectiveness and efficiency of local governments, this brings additional relevance to its inclusion in transparency research (Benito, Bastida and García, 2010; Worthington, 2000 *apud* Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera and Ortiz-Rodriguez, 2015, p. 85). A number of studies have identified a positive correlation between the size of a government and the extent of online public information disclosure (Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera and Ortiz-Rodriguez, 2015), due to the fact that public

institutions serving larger populations manage larger budgets, which increases the pressure to consider alternative methods of public service provision and to disclose relevant public information (Norris and Moon, 2005). From the perspective of agency theory, larger populations are more susceptible to conflicts of interest, which result in an increased demand for transparency in larger public organizations (Pina, Torres and Royo, 2007). Consequently, larger entities are subject to more substantial demands for transparency in comparison to their smaller counterparts; this is due to the fact that they are subject to greater scrutiny from a broader range of stakeholders. We conclude that the size of communes is a significant factor in the study of *ex officio* disclosure of public information, as larger communes are subject to external pressures and internal complexities that drive them to enhance their transparency practices. This is consistent with the results of prior studies that have consistently demonstrated a relationship between population size, budgetary scale, and increased levels of public information disclosure (Styles and Tennyson, 2007 *apud* Tavares and da Cruz, 2020).

Notable differences in the promotion of transparency have been observed between male and female mayors (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Piotrowski and Van Ryzin, 2007; Sjöberg, 2010 *apud* Tavares and da Cruz, 2020). Compared to their male counterparts, female candidates often face greater challenges (Lawless and Pearson, 2008, p. 68). Women may avoid the electoral penalties associated with gender discrimination by investing more heavily in political quality than their male counterparts, and tend to be more proactive in engaging citizens in decision-making processes, fostering participation, communication, and input. Additionally, they generally score higher on transparency indexes than their male counterparts (Zagraban and Spac, 2022, p. 1350). Araujo and Tejedo-Romero (2018) concluded that female representation in local politics enhances information transparency and reduces information asymmetry within municipalities.

At the local level, employers play a significant role in shaping the community's trajectory, frequently contributing to its growth and advancement. To ensure a symbiotic relationship between the public and private sectors, it is imperative to foster effective communication and collaboration. This will enable both parties to benefit from a mutual exchange of information and resources, ultimately enhancing the *ex officio* public information dissemination of public data. The process of disclosure is frequently the outcome of a legitimation process (Suchman, 1995, p. 2), whereby public managers endeavor to ensure organizational continuity by cultivating and sustaining the trust and confidence of stakeholders.

2.4. The Romanian context

The legislative framework governing access to information varies considerably between countries, both in terms of content and scope. In some instances, the legislation is comprehensive and general, whereas in others, it provides detailed guidelines regarding the type of information that must be disclosed proactively and what should be classified as confidential, as well as the conditions under which confidentiality applies (Islam, 2006, p. 140).

Also, the degree of specificity in defining proactive and confidential information is influenced by a country's institutional framework and cultural context. Some countries place greater emphasis on regulation based on standards, which tends to result in more detailed requirements for proactive disclosure. In contrast, others rely more on principle-based regulation.

Since 2016, all public institutions are required to display certain *ex officio* information on their websites (Radu and Dragoş, 2019, p. 447). The analyzed legislation from Romania covers additional details not included in our study, specifying the categories of information to be provided, the time limits for responding to information requests, the rights and obligations, and the procedures for interaction between authorities and citizens. If information is not provided *ex officio*, citizens can request it, and institutions must comply with these requests according to the law. Article 5(2) requires public authorities to publish and update an annual information bulletin containing this *ex officio* public information. Access to *ex officio* information may be facilitated through various channels, including display at institutional headquarters, publication in the Official Gazette or mass media, and availability on websites or designated consultation areas.

Romania's main laws ensuring public access to information are Law no. 544 of 2001 and Law no. 52 of 2003. Law no. 544 guarantees citizens the right to access public information, while Law no. 52 promotes transparency by encouraging citizen participation in decision-making and the drafting of regulations. Both laws are in line with European standards and aim to increase the accountability of public administration through written proposals or participation in public meetings, thus promoting transparency and open government. One way to ensure access to public information is to require government agencies to proactively share key information, as required by law. Another method is the right of individuals to request information from public authorities, either in writing or orally, and to receive a response.

A weakness in the legislation is the lack of penalties for public authorities that fail to provide information *ex officio*. There are no sanctions for non-compliance, which weakens efforts to ensure free access to public information. While citizens can file complaints or take legal action against authorities for unjustified denials, the lack of consequences for non-compliance shows a diminishing commitment to transparency.

The existing research on free access to information in Romania is limited; it would seem that there is room for further research into this law from Romania. For example, Dragoş (2006, p. 82) provided an analysis of the theoretical aspects of the law and Varia (2013), Weghofer-Vad (2020), and Mihalache (2021) examined the implementation of the law at the national or urban level. Only a few studies have focused on communes (Amihaiesi and Dragomir, 2011; Baciu and Codreanu, 2011; Mihalache and Szoverfi, 2011). It was noticed that authors who focused on the commune level selected their communes arbitrarily (Haruţa, Mihalache and Ranta, 2011) and did not extend their research to a wider area. Consequently, an analysis of rural communities in the North-West region was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the region's public authorities. Some authors

argue that public authorities in urban areas are more transparent and more active in providing information than is legally required (Ranta, 2014). Conversely, other authors posit that individuals in rural areas are more reticent in their dealings with authorities, which may contribute to a greater degree of transparency (Porumbescu, 2015, p. 2).

3. Methodology

This study aims to assess the level of compliance with *ex officio* disclosure laws (the study did not assess website visibility, structure, or ease of access) and to identify some factors that influence citizens' access to public information. The first hypothesis is (H1): larger population size is positively associated with higher *ex officio* compliance by local authorities. The second hypothesis (H2): female-led communes have higher compliance than male-led communes. The third hypothesis (H3): a higher presence of businesses correlates with greater *ex officio* compliance. We focused on communes in the North-West region of Romania, a middle region in terms of development and Internet access (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2023). To achieve the objective of the study, a content analysis grid was developed based on Law no. 544/2001 (Article 5, letters a to i), covering key information such as organizational structures, financial reporting, decision-making and public procurement.

To operationalize the legal framework, each type of information required by law was translated into measurable indicators that correspond directly to specific legal provisions. This systematic approach makes it possible to objectively assess public authorities' compliance with disclosure requirements. The first step in developing the methodology was to translate the qualitative provisions of Article 5 (letters a to i) into quantifiable indicators by breaking down each requirement into specific elements of information that public authorities are required to publish. These indicators were grouped into six dimensions, according to Table 1, where each dimension targets different aspects of public accountability, ensuring a thorough assessment of compliance with Law no. 544.

Once the grid was constructed, the indicators were converted into dummy variables (1 if the information was available on the website, 0 if not). Using this content analysis grid, the website of each commune was analyzed, focusing strictly on the presence of the information required by law. Through content analysis and the use of dummy variables, the empirical research provided a clear, quantifiable measure of transparency compliance.

The initial sample included 403 communes in North-West Romania, but four (4) were excluded due to non-functional websites, resulting in a final sample of 399. Excluding these communes was necessary to maintain the integrity of the study, as the absence of a website would automatically imply non-compliance with legal disclosure requirements, thus undermining validity. Data collection was done manually by reviewing each website and documenting the presence or absence of information required by Law no. 544, between June and December 2022. This thorough process allowed for a detailed assessment of each local government's compliance with the legal framework.

Table 1: Indicators analyzed and included in our grid

Dimensions	Indicators
Dimension 1: Public officials	1. Name of the person responsible for disseminating information of public interest; 2. Its contact details;
Dimension 2: Plans and planning	1. Programs; 2. Development strategies;
Dimension 3: Institutional information	1. The normative acts adopted by the mayor; 2. The normative acts adopted by the local council; 3. The list with documents produced or managed by the public institutions;
Dimension 4: Economic and financial transparency	1. Budget; 2. Balance sheet;
Dimension 5: Organizations and contact information	1. The organization name, address, phone and fax numbers, email address and web page address (includes 6 indicators); 2. The organizational structure; 3. The responsibilities of departments; 4. The operating schedule; 5. The hearing schedule of the public authority or institution – mayor, vice mayor, secretary (includes 3 indicators);
Dimension 6: Transparency and the right to information	1. Electronic claim form model; 2. Model request for information of public interest; 3. Model of administrative complaint for the withholding of information of public interest; 4. Administrative complaint form for failure to provide the requested information on time; 5. Implementation report of the law (it is not included in the analyzed article of the law, but it is mandatory for the institutions to be filled and posted online);
Total: 6 dimensions	Total: 26 indicators

Source: Own source based on Law no. 544/2001

Table 2: Research sample

County	Communes (total)	Communes excluded	Analyzed communes
Bihor	91	0	91
Bistrita-Nasaud	58	1	57
Cluj	75	0	75
Maramures	63	2	61
Satu Mare	59	1	58
Salaj	57	0	57
Total	403	4	399

Source: Own data processing

Table 3: Sample characteristics

County	Analyzed communes	Female mayor	Male mayor	No. of inhabitants	No. of businesses
Bihor	91	7	84	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 0 • Between 1001-2000: 17 • Between 2001-3000: 34 • Between 3001-4000: 21 • Between 4001-5000: 8 • Over 5001: 11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10,019 total; • 110 average;
Bistrita-Nasaud	57	0	57	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 1 • Between 1001-2000: 11 • Between 2001-3000: 17 • Between 3001-4000: 12 • Between 4001-5000: 4 • Over 5001: 12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4,584 total; • 80 average;
Cluj	75	5	70	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 3 • Between 1001-2000: 30 • Between 2001-3000: 17 • Between 3001-4000: 8 • Between 4001-5000: 9 • Over 5001: 8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13,681 total; • 182 average;
Maramures	61	6	55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 2 • Between 1001-2000: 13 • Between 2001-3000: 16 • Between 3001-4000: 11 • Between 4001-5000: 11 • Over 5001: 8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4,335 total; • 71 average;
Satu Mare	58	2	56	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 0 • Between 1001-2000: 13 • Between 2001-3000: 14 • Between 3001-4000: 13 • Between 4001-5000: 8 • Over 5001: 10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3,693 total; • 64 average;
Salaj	57	1	56	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 1000 inhabitants: 4 • Between 1001-2000: 20 • Between 2001-3000: 17 • Between 3001-4000: 14 • Between 4001-5000: 0 • Over 5001: 2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3,092 total; • 54 average;
<i>Total</i>	399	21	378	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Under 1000 inhabitants: 10</i> • <i>Between 1001-2000: 104</i> • <i>Between 2001-3000: 115</i> • <i>Between 3001-4000: 79</i> • <i>Between 4001-5000: 40</i> • <i>Over 5001: 51</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 39,404 total; • 94 average;

Source: Own data processing

The creation of a ranking of compliance serves to establish a baseline understanding of the broader patterns of adherence to Law no. 544. In the absence of this, an analysis of the

factors influencing subsequent objectives would be incomplete. It serves as the basis for evaluating the influence of external variables on compliance.

Regarding the population size the underlying assumption is that larger communes may possess a greater abundance of resources, a higher degree of visibility, or adhere to a set of expectations that is perceived to be more rigorous by the general public. By examining the relation between the mayor's gender and the level of compliance, this study aims to elucidate the impact of leadership dynamics on transparency and compliance. A positive relation between business presence and compliance suggests that pressure from the private sector may influence local governments' compliance with transparency laws. This insight helps policymakers see how the economic environment interacts with compliance, and highlights the role of business in promoting transparency. For this factor we used data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (population size in 2022), data provided by the Romanian Associations of Communes regarding the gender of mayors, and data provided by the national trade register for business presence. Including these factors adds complexity to the analysis by recognizing that the level of compliance is shaped not only by structural factors such as population size, but also by the gender of the leaders or private sector. The combined analysis provides a multifaceted view of transparency compliance, not only describing current levels of compliance, but also exploring why some communes are more compliant than others. It examines how demographic, leadership, and economic factors influence compliance.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics indicate that the disclosure of information on the websites of local public authorities remains underdeveloped. Fifty-three (53) institutions achieved a score between 26 and 20, and only two (2) communes from Cluj County achieved a maximum score of 26 (with a population between 1,000 and 3,000 inhabitants). Additionally, three (3) communes attained a score of 25, two (2) communes from Cluj County (with a population around 48,000 inhabitants and one (1) with a population of approximately 6,000 inhabitants) and one (1) from Satu Mare County (around 4,000 inhabitants). 177 communes had a score between 19–13, 164 communes had a score between 12 and 6. Five communes were included between 0 and 5 score, the lowest score being two (2), which was met in Maramureş County.

The most transparent in terms of publishing *ex officio* information is Bistrita Nasaud county (mean 15.52), followed by Cluj County (mean 14.34), Satu Mare County (14.27 mean), Bihor County (a mean of 13.68), Salaj County (13.03 mean), and Maramures County (11.90 mean). The counties are ordered according to their perceived transparency regarding *ex officio* information, with the understanding that there are variations across the six (6) dimensions within each county. It also indicates the existence of regional variations in the implementation and maintenance of transparency and ensuring access to information of public interest, which may be influenced by local governance practices, administrative capacity, or other regional factors.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

Score ranking	County (number of communes)
Between 26–20	53 total (15 from Cluj County; 12 from Satu Mare County; 9 from Bihor County; 7 from Salaj County; 6 from Bistrita Nasaud County and 4 from Maramures County)
Between 19–13	177 total (46 from Bihor County; 37 from Bistrita Nasaud County; 29 from Cluj County; 23 from Salaj County; 22 from Satu Mare County and 20 from Maramures County)
Between 12–6	164 total (36 from Bihor County; 35 from Maramures County; 30 from Cluj County; 26 from Salaj County; 23 from Satu Mare County and 14 from Bistrita Nasaud County)
Between 5–0 (2 as minimum value)	5 total (2 from Cluj County; 2 from Maramures County; 1 from Satu Mare County)

Source: Own data processing using SPSS

An analysis of each dimension revealed a lack of interest in fulfilling the requirements set forth. First dimension, regarding public officials, demonstrated a notable absence of compliance, with 85.2% of institutions failing to post the information regarding the individual responsible for overseeing access to information. This trend was similarly observed in the second dimension, where the majority of public institutions (41.9%) failed to provide the strategy and programs of the commune. Additionally, the sixth dimension exhibited a similar pattern, with 37.3% of institutions not posting any information. With regard to the third, fourth, and fifth dimensions, it was observed that the majority of institutions provided comprehensive information. For a better understanding, in the table below (Table 5) presents the mean and standard deviation, for each analyzed dimension as it was operationalized in Table 1.

Table 5: Summary of statistics

Dimension	Mean – total	Std. Dev.	Mean Bihor County	Mean Bistrita Nasaud County	Mean Cluj County	Mean Maramures County	Mean Satu Mare County	Mean Salaj County
Dimension 1	0.24	0.613	0.37	0.07	0.45	0.08	0.22	0.12
Dimension 2	0.77	0.740	0.74	0.75	0.68	0.67	0.90	0.89
Dimension 3	1.78	0.898	1.68	1.93	1.85	1.66	1.91	1.67
Dimension 4	1.12	0.774	1.11	1.26	1.36	0.72	1.19	1.00
Dimension 5	7.95	2.477	7.63	9.30	8.11	7.26	7.86	7.75
Dimension 6	1.94	2.000	2.15	2.21	1.89	1.51	2.19	1.60
<i>Total dimensions</i>	<i>13.79</i>	<i>4.689</i>	<i>13.68</i>	<i>15.53</i>	<i>14.35</i>	<i>11.90</i>	<i>14.28</i>	<i>13.04</i>

Source: Own data processing using SPSS

The dataset seems to have a mix of relatively stable dimensions (dimensions 1 to 4) and a couple of dimensions (dimensions 5 and 6) that contribute more to variability. Dimension 5 in particular is an outlier with much higher values, which could indicate that it measures something fundamentally different from the others or has a different scale. Overall, the sum of the dimensions reflects the cumulative effect of these differences, with higher variability coming from a few key dimensions. Bistrita-Nasaud consistently scores higher than the other counties in several dimensions, especially in dimensions 5 and 6, resulting in the highest total score. This suggests that this county outperforms the other counties in the metrics represented by these dimensions, but it also stands out as an outlier, with significantly higher performance in several dimensions.

Cluj also performs well, with above-average scores in several dimensions, giving it the second highest overall score. This suggests that Cluj is performing similarly well, although not as well as Bistrita-Nasaud. Maramures has consistently lower scores, especially in dimensions 4 and 6, resulting in the lowest overall score. This could indicate challenges or lower levels in representation of these dimensions, and the county seems to be lagging behind, especially in dimension 4, which could be a cause for concern. Satu Mare and Salaj have relatively balanced performances, although Salaj tends to have slightly lower overall scores. Bihor scores close to the mean in most dimensions, which places it in the middle of the overall dimension scores.

Of the 53 communes that have a score between 26 and 20, three (3) are headed by women mayors, have between 8 and 4,612 businesses and a population between 1,025 and 48,384 inhabitants. The analysis reveals a notable lack of female leadership, with only a small percentage of communes led by women, suggesting potential barriers such as social, political or cultural regarding gender equality in governance. In addition, the economic diversity among these communes is significant, with some having minimal economic activity while others are more developed. Population differences suggest that the communes face different governance challenges. This diversity in leadership, economy, and demographics reflects the complex and varied nature of local governance in each commune.

Table 6: Hypothesis testing – results

Hypothesis	R value	R Square	Sig.
Hypothesis 1	.164	.027	.001
Hypothesis 2	.020	.000	.690
Hypothesis 3	.135	.018	.007

Source: Own data processing using SPSS

The first hypothesis tested the effect of population size on compliance with Law no. 544/2001 using 2022 data. The low R square (0.027) suggests that population size has a minimal impact on transparency. Larger communes may have more resources for compliance, but this does not guarantee better transparency, especially if governance is inefficient.

Since Law no. 544 applies uniformly to all communes, both large and small tend to meet similar baseline standards. While larger communes often show a greater tendency toward *ex officio* public information disclosure due to their larger budgets and accountability, smaller communes can compensate with effective digital tools. This finding is consistent with Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera and Ortiz-Rodriguez (2015), who found that larger institutions tend to adopt more transparent practices under pressure from stakeholders and service demands.

The second objective of this study was to examine the relationship between the gender of mayors and an increased level of access to information of public interest. Our hypothesis was not confirmed, the gender of the mayor was found to have no impact on the level of access to information of public interest. This is evidenced by the values of R (0.020) and R square (0.000), which indicate no statistical significance (Sig. = 0.690) and no correlation between these two variables and the level of transparency. It can be argued that the hypothesis has not been confirmed due to the fact that in Romania, the majority of mayors are male. Indeed, in the North-West region, only 5.21% of mayors are female, this percentage reducing the statistical power of our analysis. The absence of gender representation may have constrained our capacity to discern any potential influence of gender on transparency levels. Therefore, while the hypothesis could not be supported by the data, this finding underscores the necessity for further research in regions with greater gender balance among local leadership, as well as the potential influence of other contextual factors on transparency outcomes. The underrepresentation of female mayors is also indicative of broader societal and political dynamics, such as the gender disparities evident in political leadership positions, which could potentially inform the shaping of governance practices. Furthermore, the results highlight the necessity of considering additional contextual factors that may impact the level of ensuring access of citizens to information of public interest at the local level. For example, institutional frameworks, local governance structures, political culture, and socio-economic conditions may exert a more significant influence on these practices than individual leadership traits such as gender. The gender of mayors also has a significant impact on the level of transparency observed in communes' governance. Female mayors, despite facing more significant obstacles in the political sphere, tend to show a greater propensity to foster citizen participation and communication, which ultimately contributes to higher levels of transparency. A review of the literature reveals that women in leadership roles are more inclined to promote information disclosure and reduce information asymmetry within communes, thereby further enhancing governance practices.

To test the last hypothesis, we employed our grid as the dependent variable and the total number of businesses in each commune as the independent variable. The findings of our study indicate that while there is a statistically significant correlation between the number of businesses in a commune and the level of transparency (Sig. = .007), the strength of this relationship is relatively weak (R square = .018). The relatively weak explanatory power of the number of businesses indicates that other factors, such as local leadership, institutional

capacity, legal enforcement, or citizen engagement, may exert a more substantial influence on transparency. Although it is widely acknowledged that transparency encourages more constructive engagement with stakeholders, this study demonstrates that the mere presence of a greater number of businesses in a given commune does not inevitably result in enhanced levels of transparency. This suggests that the influence of businesses on public authorities to comply more fully with transparency laws may be limited in the absence of other actors. Although the presence of businesses can contribute to a more vibrant and engaged community, this factor alone does not appear to significantly influence the transparency practices of local authorities. It may be the case that public authorities require additional pressures, incentives, or frameworks beyond business engagement in order to meaningfully improve their compliance with transparency obligations. The role of local employers and the private sector in community development is further evidenced by their capacity to influence transparency through collaboration and the mutual exchange of information. This symbiotic relationship between the public and private sectors is of paramount importance for ensuring that *ex officio* public information disclosure meets the needs of stakeholders, thereby fostering a culture of openness and trust. It would be helpful for future research to identify additional factors and examine how they interact with one another to influence transparency outcomes.

5. Discussions and conclusions

Our findings show that communes in rural North-West Romania still largely fail to comply with the *ex officio* disclosure requirements of Law no. 544 of 2001. This indicates a persistent culture of secrecy despite legal mandates. Other factors such as informal communication with citizens, or the small number of people in rural areas who have access to the Internet and computers, combined with the lack of mechanisms to verify compliance with the law, could be the reasons for the low interest in the website as a means of publishing unofficial information. In 2022, 73.7% of rural and 88.6% of urban households in Romania had internet access, with the highest rates in the Bucharest-Ilfov, Center, and North-West regions and the lowest in the North-East, South-Muntenia, and South-East regions (National Institute of Statistics, Press Release, 2022).

Many local authorities fail to meet minimum transparency standards, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement and possible sanctions. Descriptive statistics show low compliance, with an average score of 13.79 out of 26. While some communes are fully compliant, others lag significantly behind, reflecting inconsistencies likely due to resource constraints and government priorities. Specific deficiencies were noted in areas such as disclosure of responsible officials and strategic documents. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that rural areas often lack resources and do not prioritize transparency (Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera and Ortiz-Rodriguez, 2015).

One of the main findings of this study is the impact of population size on compliance with transparency laws. In alignment with existing literature, the findings indicated

that larger communes exhibited heightened levels of transparency, potentially attributable to augmented budgets, institutional resources, and enhanced visibility (Garcia-Tabuyo, Saez-Martin and del Carmen Caba-Perez, 2015; Norris and Moon, 2005). Nevertheless, the impact of population size on transparency was found to be relatively modest ($R = 0.027$), indicating that other factors also play a significant role in determining transparency outcomes. This finding underscores the intricate nuances of transparency practices at the local level, where factors such as governance quality, resource allocation, and institutional capacity may exert a considerable influence, potentially on par with that of population size. The results indicate that larger communes are more likely to comply with transparency laws, yet compliance cannot be attributed solely to population size.

The initial hypothesis that female mayors would exhibit higher levels of *ex officio* compliance compared to their male counterparts was not substantiated by the findings. The regression analysis yielded no statistically significant correlation between the gender of mayors and transparency levels. This may be attributed to the limited representation of female mayors in the region (5.21%), which reduced the statistical power of the analysis. While previous studies have indicated that female leaders are more likely to promote transparency and public participation (Araujo and Tejedo-Romero, 2018), our findings suggest that further research is necessary in regions or countries with a more balanced gender representation among local leaders. Moreover, it is conceivable that additional contextual variables, such as institutional frameworks or political culture, may exert a more pronounced influence on transparency than individual leadership traits like gender.

The study also examined the relationship between the presence of businesses and transparency, postulating that a greater number of businesses would have a beneficial impact on *ex officio* compliance. Although a statistically significant correlation was observed, the relationship was relatively weak, indicating that the mere presence of businesses is not a robust predictor of transparency. This indicates that additional factors, such as citizen engagement, local governance structures, or legal enforcement, may exert a more substantial influence on the development of transparency practices. Although businesses are significant stakeholders in local governance, their capacity to facilitate transparency enhancements may be constrained in the absence of comprehensive institutional reforms or external pressures.

This study highlights the need for ongoing efforts to improve local transparency, including updates to Law no. 544/2001 to introduce penalties for non-compliance and mechanisms to verify compliance. These reforms are critical to ensuring that local governments meet their legal obligations, which can improve governance and community well-being. While factors such as population size and stakeholder engagement are important, they are not enough to ensure compliance with transparency laws. Stronger enforcement, sanctions and monitoring systems are essential to hold public authorities accountable. The study also suggests that future research should consider broader factors such as political culture, institutional capacity, and socioeconomic conditions, which may have a greater impact on transparency than leadership or economic variables alone. Expanding

the research into other regions and using a longitudinal approach could track transparency trends over time. In addition, the study's content analysis methodology could be applied to other communes in Romania or even internationally to promote transparency awareness and compliance monitoring.

The study provides important insights into the factors influencing transparency compliance in rural local governments in Romania. While population size has a modest effect, the gender of mayors and the presence of businesses have a limited impact. The findings highlight the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and a broader approach to analyzing transparency practices, which are critical for building public trust, increasing citizen participation, and promoting democratic governance by improving accountability and reducing corruption. Future research should examine a broader range of factors, including education, civic engagement, and institutional capacity, and use larger samples. Longitudinal studies could show how transparency compliance evolves over time and assess the long-term effects of governance reforms aimed at improving access to public information.

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