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# EDITORIAL: LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL – THE THIRD DIMENSION OF THE EU

**Simona KUKOVIČ, guest editor**[1]

Local and regional authorities have always been the backbone of European democracy. They are the building blocks not only of each member state, but also of the EU itself, as they are responsible for managing hundreds of thousands of projects funded (at least in part) by EU programmes. According to official figures,[2] two-thirds of the 550 programmes funded under EU cohesion policy are managed at the regional level. Every day, new projects are adopted under these programmes, which aim to make regions and municipalities better places to live and work. By creating links between them, regions forge social, economic and cultural bonds that connect Europeans. There is no doubt that municipalities and regions make an important contribution to the development of the European Union. Local development policies have become increasingly important in recent years as governments around the world seek to address the persistent problems of disadvantaged and underdeveloped areas by supporting local, bottom-up approaches that complement mainstream national programmes. The increasing globalisation of the economy and technological change have opened up new markets and competition to which local development policies should respond. The EU has also become active in the field of local development by including the concept of local development in the new long-term EU budget (2021–2027), for which the European Commission has proposed a more modern, simple and flexible cohesion policy as the main investment policy and, at the same time, as a tangible expression of EU solidarity aimed at the sustainable development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives. Moreover, the EU's regional and cohesion policies are often considered core policies with an impact on the EU and an essential component of the EU.

When considering local development, we must not forget to emphasise that more than one million EU politicians are elected at local and regional level in all EU Member States. Moreover, empirical research shows that local and regional authorities enjoy greater trust than national governments in all Member States, and greater trust than the EU in most countries. It turns out that municipalities and regions are a way to regain trust in politics, not only in the EU but also at the national level. More than 120,000 municipalities and regions in EU member states are led by progressive mayors and presidents. As key political actors, they must therefore be highly adaptable and develop the skills that the increasingly dynamic working environment demands of them. On the other hand, they must maintain an authentic connection with citizens and listen to their needs and

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[2] See European Committee of the Regions 2019; available at: https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/brochures/Documents/Working%20together%20to%20bring%20the%20EU%20closer%20to%20its%20citizens/3975%20blueprint%20brochure%20FIN.PDF.

desires. Local leaders must not only focus on the present, but also turn their gaze to the future and therefore adapt to the dynamics of the challenges and changes to come.

However, local and regional leaders alone are not enough. In all EU member states, active citizens are needed who are willing to participate in decision-making processes and, in particular, to contribute to the common goals of a better quality of life. Local and regional authorities are in close contact with local businesses, social partners, civil society and citizens, and have valuable first-hand experience of the needs and aspirations that arise in society. Listening to the concerns of citizens and local and regional authorities and meeting their expectations is crucial to strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the EU and bringing Europe closer to its citizens. Active citizens and their democratic participation are fundamental for both the European Union and the regions and municipalities to shape their common future.

This thematic issue of the Journal of Comparative Politics is produced in the framework of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Chair entitled "Leadership for European Local Development 2040"[3]. The issue is dedicated to the development and different forms of participation and involvement of citizens at local and regional levels in different EU Member States. It contains seven articles that contribute to the above discussion. In the first article, **Markus Reiners** focuses on the comparison between representative and direct (participatory) democracy and shows the implications for the comprehensive Stuttgard 21 project. **Silvia Ručinská**, **Miroslav Fečko**, **Ondrej Mitaľ** and **Michal Jesenko** identify and analyse bottom-up response activities of municipalities and cities in crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic in the Slovak Republic. **Pavel Maškarinec**'s paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the quality of regional democracy in the post-communist Czech Republic and Poland, focusing on two theoretically constitutive dimensions of democracy - participation and competition. **István Hoffman**'s contribution analyses the local administrative systems of the Visegrád countries and local development policies in light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Political participation at the local level is analysed in **Miro Haček**'s contribution, in which the author highlights the main features of the most recent local elections in Slovenia. In addition, **Peter Bláha** sheds light on another form of local democracy by focusing on the use of the local referendum instrument in the Czech Republic between 2000 and 2020. Last but not least, **Martin Plešivčák** addresses the issue of far-right support in Slovakia in light of the socioeconomic situation at the regional (district) level.

[3] Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Chair »Leadership for European Local Development 2040 (LELD2040)", ID: 101047424.

# COMPARISON OF DIRECT DEMOCRATIC AND REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION – CAUSES OF AND RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

**Markus REINERS**[1]

*At the present time, the debate about the difficulties being encountered in connection with communicating and implementing government policy is not only intensifying but also gaining increasing attention, as regards the alleged deficits of representative democracy that are becoming evident in the Federal Republic of Germany. The debate also raises the question whether this development could be alleviated by allowing more direct democratic forms of participation or whether, in fact, they would hinder innovation. The controversial Stuttgart 21 railway project is but one example that illustrates the issue being discussed; whereby it needs to be noted that the debate extends into the parliaments as well. With the aim of gaining more in-depth understanding, the different lines of reasoning on representative and direct democratic forms of participation are compared. Furthermore, the question whether modernization of the government would be a step in the right direction is discussed. All in all, it would not be productive to change the course simply to adopt a different system variant. Nonetheless, the question remains as to how such large-scale government projects as Stuttgart 21 can be managed better in future. Academic research provides answers to this question.*

**Key words**: direct democracy; representative democracy; liquid democracy; referendums; political participation; government modernization policy.

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## 1 CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

It is entirely possible that a wave of modernization is on the horizon - more precisely, a phase, in which multiple aspects of political representation and legitimation, communication or design of government policy will be scrutinized and may lead to contemplation of moving away from representative systems toward direct democratic forms of representation. This opinion could be embraced when one studies the development history of one of the most prominent examples of a large-scale government infrastructure project in Germany, namely the Stuttgart 21 railway project, and the controversies that arose in connection with it. The incidents that accompanied the project are exemplary because they illustrate the issue being discussed in a special way: the impact of the protest was not limited to Germany but extended beyond the country's borders. Moreover, multiple representative organs – from the municipal to the European level – extensively concerned themselves with the protest.

Hence, the research question is whether the realization of large-scale political projects would be smoother if they were based on direct democratic decision-making processes. The debate also regards the discourse on decentralization and the concept of subsidiarity. Hence, a key question in this connection is: Do referendums matter? To put it differently, can forms of direct democracy be taken as instruments of control or as a means to initiate policy and innovation and, thus, to enrich political competition; or, by contrast, should they actually be viewed as instruments of persistence, incrustation and hindrance to innovation (Luthardt 1994, 23–26; see Box-Steffensmeier, Brady and Collier 2008; Martini 2011; Hornig 2011, 475–492; Keil and Thaidigsmann 2013; Gabriel 2015, 87–113; Kerstin 2015, 304–334; Merkel and Ritzi 2017; Qvortrup 2018). It seems that the legitimation of direct democratic processes runs counter to the capacity for exercising control and solving problems. The empirical example given above shows that more grassroots democracy tends to prolong processes without promoting the realization of projects per se. In any case, critical discussion about how large-scale projects can be realized effectively in future will be necessary.

The demonstrations in Stuttgart never were only about a railway station, the northern or southern wing of the railway station, the trees that had to be felled, the mineral springs, the topography or geologically demanding subsoil that may prove problematic in connection with the underground construction work. It goes without saying that these kinds of issues lend themselves to creating uncertainty and, thus, mobilizing the masses. They basically can be understood as symbols that point to the actual heart of the matter: Many of the people protesting the project aspired to change the structure of power and gain more co-determination in politics. Basically, parts of the population used the protests as a venue for expressing their demand for more direct forms of democracy because they believed that the established political forces were failing (see Arnim von 2000; Geissel and Newton 2012; see Ness 2009).

Parties seem to be less and less able to manage social problems at the political level. In the meantime, a crisis of representation is being conjured up time and again (see Ohme-Reinicke 2012; Merkel and Ritzi 2017). Accordingly, civil movements that run counter to the logics of parties are on the rise. This can be ascribed to the circumstance that parties are subject to the rationale of continuously gaining more power, which is why individual contextual issues primarily are dealt with under the aspect of attaining not only the majority but the highest possible number of votes.

Direct parliamentarism, participatory democracy or liquid democracy refer to a concept that maintains that a mixture of representative and direct democracy would be suitable for solving our problems of government (Aden 2004; Jabusch 2011; see Gabriel 2015, 87–113; Kersting 2015, 307–334). At the same time, so-called interactive democracy has been the subject of debates with the objective of assessing the influence of the Internet as a medium of communication and regarding promoting current trends since the new media have proven their worth as a significant catalyst (Leggewie and Bieber 2001, 37–45; Perlot 2008). Take for example a message posted on Twitter shortly after the incident on 30 September 2010 in Stuttgart that became known as Black Thursday. The tweet claimed that police had set up a water cannon again when, in fact, it later turned out that opponents to the project had refurbished a water cannon as a reminder of Black Thursday. Nevertheless, the tweet compelled thousands of protesters to gather in the Schlossgarten. As helpful as new media may be to reach many people it is equally questionable when you call to mind that incorrect or incomplete messages may initiate mobilization effects that can only barely be controlled and, above all, generate a feeling of being able to do it better than the established political forces. The large amount of information supplied by the media lets people believe that they are informed and should have a voice. However, this assumption is erroneous and may be deceptive. As a matter of fact, more quantity – which frequently may be in inverse proportion to quality – demands that a critical attitude be adopted towards the information provided and calls for high selection quality. In the end, excessive information causes a drift into a zone of uncertainty, because highly complex information meets with a society that is becoming increasingly more complex. It stands to reason that perceived uncertainty generates a wish for change.

The deficits of democracy are being invoked repeatedly, not only in Germany, and this involves criticism of the institutional representative form of politics. Since the 1990s, many citizens have been turning away from the dominant actors in the political system. As a result, apathy towards parties and democratic politics as well as erosion of the political party system has become apparent (Arzheimer 2002; see Huth 2004). Accordingly, this is evidenced by declining voter turnout, a more critical public and protests. Amongst other things, the discussions show that direct democratic forms of participation are en vogue: apathy towards politics and politicians frequently is not brought about by increasing disinterest in politics or a general attitude of refusal; in fact, these kinds of mechanisms reflect a demand for other forms of political participation (see Schiller and Mittendorf 2013).

As a result, demands calling for more participation are voiced, and this in turn sparks debate over whether the causes and deplorable situation are the fault of the actors or the system itself, whether direct democratic elements could help solve prevailing problems or whether such instruments would create new irreconcilable problems. Basically, a normative analysis of representative or direct democratic forms of participation would help to ascertain whether our systemic framework conditions still suffice or whether, in the meantime, a governmental modernization gap needs to be closed and how this could be achieved. The discussion may be old, but, at the same time, it is more relevant than ever before. This is demonstrated by one of the most incisive examples in recent times, namely Stuttgart 21. The course of events is taken up in the prevailing theoretical discussion to determine why it proved so difficult to change the processes. Moreover, if a reorientation toward other system variants does not seem productive, academic research has answers to the question as to how such projects ultimately can be accomplished in a better way.

## 2 COMPARISON OF DIRECT AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Today, the right for referendums has been established in all German states; however, at the federal level, the Basic Law – with one small exception – has remained hermetically abstinent from referendums, even though appropriate amendments to the constitution have been adopted (Luthardt and Waschkuhn 1997, 59–87). In this respect it should be kept in mind that, when comparing the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg to the federal level, it becomes apparent that Baden-Wuerttemberg, more than any other German state, takes an approach like that of the federal government because the quorum for direct forms of participation is comparatively high here. Therefore, in this respect, note should be taken that such instruments could be watered down to a theoretical factor in political decision-making processes (constitution of the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg 2020).

One argument in favour of expanding the possibilities of participation is that democracy must not be understood as being limited to elections, with citizens taking on the role of bystanders at all other times. Citizens must be given the opportunity to participate. By its nature, democracy is committed to establishing a relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. Therefore, a state can only be considered democratic in the true sense of the word if as large number of its citizens as possible is involved in the decision-making process and, basically, each and every citizen is given an equal opportunity to do so. On the one hand, it is frequently argued that one can hardly speak about democracy when the people are limited to selecting representatives. On the other hand, it is asserted that citizens (citoyen) are by no means relegated to passivity after elections but can exert influence in myriad ways in representative systems (Kornelius and Roth 2004; see Rehmet and Wunder 2018; Rehmet 2019).

With respect to the concept of participation, it can be proposed that referendums contribute to more legitimacy and to the stability of the system because they provide a differentiated basis of legitimation. The distance between the political classes and citizens could be alleviated by instituting referendums between elections. As a result, these instruments could be used as channels of transmission, so to speak, between citizens and the functional elites and, thus, render political decisions transparent within the framework of a communicative democracy (Steffani 2013).

This would be accompanied by another functional attribution: Referendums serve as sources of information and articulation in connection with forming the political will of citizens and decision-makers. At the same time, this process has the advantage that it could be used implicitly as a mechanism to integrate protest and social views. As far as political issues are concerned, protest potential could be included in different dimensions and at different levels of the decision-making process. In addition to these aspects, the attribution is significant for another reason, namely about control, balance and veto functions (Luthardt 1994, 158–159). Referendums are interpreted as being a constitutional counterweight and adopted as a means to balance and control the power of the parties in a democratic manner (see Gabriel 2015, 87–113; Kersting 2015, 307–334).

Another argument, one that takes a decision-theoretic approach, assumes of increasing complexity. In view of the ever-growing amount of data, better and more rational methods of processing and collecting information are urgently needed. Planning procedures can only be carried out in a meaningful and targeted manner if the needs of the persons concerned are known. Theories with a normative orientation claim that forms of direct democracy can promote the differentiation between democracy and the institutional structure. In this connection, it is assumed that not only greater and more intensive participation will be achieved but, moreover, that the output will be better than that gained through representative political decision-making processes (see Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

By implementing representative elements, it would be possible to overcome institutional obstacles, carry issues into the legislative arenas and achieve the goal pursued thereby. Accordingly, instruments of direct democracy are considered instruments that tend to promote participation, control and issues in the decision-making process. Hence, the proposition normatively proceeds from the input side. A structural expansion on the input side leads to functionally positive results on the output side. Referendums have the capacity to resolve blockades because they enable optimal integration and correction. Theoretically, a significant point in this respect is that direct democratic forms are legitimated through the dictum of the sovereignty of the people. This can be countered with the argument that participation as such certainly does not a priori lead to a better result. The relevant point is the quality of the participation, which ultimately can contribute to the objective of taking a good and justifiable decision. Then again, participation, or more participation, may possibly complicate the forming of the political will and the decision-making process. Consequently, it can be stated that meaningful participation of the citizens, even if it is rightly considered a positive element of democracy, requires a minimum of defined rules and formalities. Then again, they should not be so complicated as to render an objectively optimal result impossible from the outset (Sontheimer 1988, 6; see Geissel and Newton 2012; Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

Luthardt takes a maximum position and concludes that, although a high degree of participation is a distinct feature of direct democratic processes, there are no grounds for asserting that direct processes lead to more legitimation and better results than representative decision-making procedures when one looks at the political reality and the mode of operation of our institutions in the context of complex democracies. From this standpoint, any form of direct democracy is considered an instrument that causes political blockades and delays in the political decision-making process. Accordingly, the productive aspect connected with participation would, in fact, have a restrictive effect. Sceptics fear that direct forms of participation would lead to the erosion of representative political contexts (Luthardt 1994, 164–165).

The aspects stated above indicate that more direct participation does not necessarily improve the results achieved by politics. The theory of institutional democracy adds another aspect to the debate about the challenges arising in connection with more participation, complexity and difficulty of control. Whether tasks can be accomplished primarily depends on the prevailing form of democracy. A state having a well-established tradition of referendums, such as Switzerland, is better equipped to deal with petitions for more intensive participation than a state organized as a representative democracy under a dominant constitution. In connection with a purely representative constitution, the participatory revolution inevitably entails an increase in non-conventional political participation and, most certainly, a higher probability that conflicts will

escalate, something that is not necessarily the case in a direct democracy with referendums. However, as is illustrated by Switzerland, more responsiveness comes at the price of high decision-making costs, above all high consensus-building costs, and a higher probability of processes being blockaded (see Gabriel 2015; Kersting 2015, 307–334; Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

Accordingly, a central argument is that direct democratic decisions cannot process the political complexities sufficiently and adequately; therefore, they run counter to any means of control. This problem is substantiated by arguing that the logic of decisions based on democratic referendums amounts to a negation of compromises. Such decisions would thwart the decisions of representational institutions (Luthardt 1994, 159–160). Using referendums to verify the decisions taken by parliaments means strengthening the power of persistence because any compromise between the parties involved would be excluded, as Weber noted (1976).

In this respect, the formula "more direct democracy = more sovereignty of the people" is striking and alluring but possibly too simple. It is explained that, when proposed as the alleged "royal road of democracy," it is way too undifferentiated and by no means appropriate in the face of the complexity of the problems connected thereto. The emphatic use of the comparative form is devoid of theoretical background and lacks practical relevance: not only is it overly simplistic but, in addition, it underestimates conflicts or shifts in power. All generalizable experiences gained in clearly weakening democracies based on proportional representation or consociational democracies, particularly in Switzerland, show that plebiscitary democracy always is accompanied by retardant aspects and elements that stunt innovation and that processes are prolonged to an unjustifiable extent (Luthardt and Waschkuhn 1997, 60; see Kersting 2015, 307–334).

Another aspect that is brought forward is the lack of responsiveness of direct democratic decisions. They are not associated with an identifiable person, party or institution, which assumes responsibility for the result (Luthardt 1994, 60). From a theoretical standpoint, the decision behaviour is diminished in connection with substantive decisions. It follows a simple yes-or-no logic (Bobbio, Griffin and Dellamy 2014, 117; Luthardt 1994, 160). Yes-or-no decisions "do not include the opportunities of a critical evaluation of multiple individual preferences based on argumentation and discourse" (Windhoff-Héritier 2019). For this reason, the issue whether democracy can come to terms with increasing participation, growing complexity and massive limitations of political control or whether it is unable to cope with these circumstances as such is all the more decisive. The different opinions expressed in this regard by the various families of democracy theory range from a continuum of positive valuation up to rather pessimistic conclusions.

From the point of view of political theory, the arguments seem to be well-balanced. Diverse patterns of reasoning are used in arguing for or against direct democratic decision-making processes. Luthardt and Waschkuhn state that the topoi that are embedded in the concepts of democracy, legitimation and participation theories primarily refer to the relation between political elites and non-elites, representation, possible devaluation or revaluation of the parliament, the significance of political leadership and the extent of political involvement in a mass democracy, which excludes an assembly democracy. To put it in a nutshell: According to the authors, the issue is whether the structural pattern of socio-political mediation processes should take the form of a grassroots (bottom up) or elitist (top down) democracy. They cogently cite the essential pros and cons of

a referendum democracy (Luthardt and Waschkuhn 1997, 60–61; see Geissel and Newton 2012, Gabriel 2015, 87–113; Kersting 2015, 307–334; Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

On the one hand, emphasis is placed not only on such aspects as reinforcing the sovereignty of the people as the supreme source of political legitimation, realizing the postulate of democracy, and accentuating the potential arising from factoring in values and interests as well as the possible conflict potential but also on the counter principle to spectator democracy. Direct democracy ensures more participation, more fully taps the human potential as well as the social capital of the polity both individually and collectively. These kinds of processes generally ensure more transparency, resolve fundamental controversies and lead to high acceptance and legitimation of the decisions. Finally, direct democracy promotes political socialization as well as education for maturity and responsibility, reduces phenomena of alienation and allows any driving forces taking a stand against the arrogance of the political class to be released in a productive way (see Geissel and Newton 2012; Kersting 2015, 307–334; Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

On the other hand, it may well be that direct democracy is only suitable for political-territorial units that are modest in size. The complexity prevalent in industrial societies excludes broad-scale direct democratic processes since they may ask too much of the citizens, who on average do not have expertise or knowledge regarding the matter concerned. For this reason, it would be unreasonable to expect all citizens to continuously occupy themselves with public matters; instead, competent political leadership is needed. Votes affected by coincidental constellations and mood swings often tip the scales in direct democratic processes and, thus, do not imply decision-making rationality. Reducing the response behavior to "all or nothing" is far too simple and does not leave room for intermediary solutions and compromises. Moreover, the people as such can only take selective decisions; in many instances, issues are pursued only by interested minorities and, therefore, the results are not coherent to a large extent. Ultimately, such processes require a lot of time and frequently hinder innovations. Therefore, it is doubtful whether conflicts would be defused. Accordingly, as far as the perspectives of the formal participation of the citizens is concerned, scepticism, at best acceptance, is called for based on the observations made above (Kitschelt 1996, 17–96; see Geissel and Newton 2012; Kersting 2015, 307–334; Merkel and Ritzi 2017).

Experiences gained at the municipal level largely confirm the statements. Sontheimer (1988) already remarked that the representative structure of the governmental system stipulated by Germany's Basic Law was widely accepted before demands for more participation were articulated and discussed more emphatically. The participation of the people in elections was considered both an imperative as well as adequate form of participation. The act of voting itself certainly is the decisive act of legitimation; however, it is not the same as participating in a political decision about a concrete issue. It is but an expression of support for one side. Thus, representative democracy may need to be supported by participatory elements, without there having to be a debate about replacing it. A feeling of uneasiness regarding the representative structure has been prevailing in Germany for a while now, and this feeling was reanimated in connection with the Stuttgart 21 project. Accordingly, the highest possible degree of participation is considered the prerequisite for good and just politics.

The arguments speak for and against implementing or expanding direct democratic elements. Although it is claimed that direct democracy cannot work in Germany, it is indisputable that the possibilities created by our constitution

have reached their limits and that the demands for more direct participation are justified. It needs to be noted that the representative variant does not work perfectly either because the globalized world is subject to fast-paced changes and political attitudes, as it were, change quicker than was the case in the 20th century. More than ever, the actual issue is: Do referendums really matter? It is evident that any one-dimensional explanations need to be rejected. After deliberating the issue dialectically, a normative interim conclusion can be reached: more direct formal participation leads to more legitimation of decisions at the expense of the ability to steer and find solutions to problems. Problems are not significantly reduced by more direct democracy. Instead, it seems that new problems arise and stand in the way of innovation.

When this maximum diametrical position is taken, any discussions about our system are not productive as such. For all that, it is obvious that there is a pertinent modernization gap. This is illustrated very clearly by way of the empirical Stuttgart 21 project. So, if a reorientation to fundamentally different systemic prerequisites is not productive, then careful thought must be given to how such projects can be handled better in future. Accordingly, it may prove helpful to briefly look at the course of the project, in particular at the crucial period of time, and why it proved so difficult to alter.

## 3 COURSES OF THE PROJECT

The Stuttgart 21 project, which involves construction of an underground train station, was announced to the public as early as 1994. At the end of 1995, the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, the city of Stuttgart and the surrounding region reached a basic agreement with Deutsche Bahn AG and the Federal Government to realize the project. Subsequently, financial arrangements were explored. In 2001, the planning approval procedure was initiated, and the decision to adopt the urban land use plan was taken in February 2005. In April 2003, an inquiry procedure began, during which the Regional Administrative Authority of Stuttgart examined more than 5,000 objections submitted by private persons. In April 2006, the Higher Administrative Court of Baden-Wuerttemberg rejected several actions filed by opponents of the project (Der Spiegel 2007a).

In June 2006, the project partners agreed to decide about the project and the funding, since this had not been completely clarified yet at the time. One of the main points of dispute was that the cost estimates had increased drastically since the 1990s (State Parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg 2009). In addition to the Federal Government, whose contribution, amongst other things, was supported by EU funds, Deutsche Bahn AG would bear the major share of costs. Baden-Wuerttemberg would fund a comparably smaller share, and even less costs would be borne by the city, the airport and the region of Stuttgart (Kefer 2012, 8–21). In view of the increase in costs, Deutsche Bahn decided to scale up their funding.

A look at the decisions taken by the land of Baden-Wuerttemberg shows that the approval of the project was carried by 115 "Yes" votes to 15 "No" votes, which were cast by the Alliance90/The Greens parliamentary group in October 2006 (State Parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg 2006). In July 2007, the project partners agreed on the distribution of costs (Der Spiegel 2007b). The financing agreement was finally signed in April 2009 (Der Spiegel 2009). The parliamentary group of The Greens in the State Parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg submitted a request to the Bundestag demanding that a

moratorium be imposed on the project. On 16 December 2009, the Traffic Committee of the German Bundestag recommended that the request be rejected, and the plenary session followed this recommendation on the next day (German Bundestag 2009).

In November 2007, a petition for a referendum signed by more than 60,000 persons (in fact only 20,000 signatures would have been required) was submitted to the mayor of Stuttgart. The petition's ultimate objective was to force the city to withdraw from the project. The request for allowing a referendum was denied by the city's municipal council with 45 "No" and 15 "Yes" votes on the grounds that it was legally inadmissible. The Regional Administrative Authority of Stuttgart and the Administrative Court of Stuttgart rejected the objections. Ever since the approval of the project, many protesters has been gathering at the weekly Monday Demonstrations (Die Zeit 2010). On 30 September 2010, the protests the preparatory work being undertaken in the Schlossgarten park escalated and up to 400 persons were injured (Focus 2010).

To break the deadlock, Heiner Geissler was called in to arbitrate negotiations between advocates and opponents of the project in eight meetings scheduled to be held from 22 October to 27 November 2010 (Frankfurter Rundschau 2010). On 30 November 2010, Mr. Geissler announced his arbitration decision, which, although it basically was in favour of the project, did propose numerous changes (S 21 Plus). The arbitration also declared that any decisions regarding any proposals that were made with the aim of increasing the station's capacity would be taken after a stress test, the results of which would be presented in July 2011. According to the results of the stress test, the underground through station would be able to handle 30 percent more train arrivals at peak times (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2010).

Following the state election and change in power in March 2011, Alliance 90/The Greens and the SPD party drew up their coalition agreement and agreed to hold a referendum on the Stuttgart 21 project (Alliance 90/The Greens). At the end of July 2011, the draft of a law regarding the exercise of termination rights in connection with the Stuttgart 21 project (S21-Kündigungsgesetz) was brought before the state parliament; however, it was rejected by the state parliament on 29 September 2011. This decision paved the way for the referendum that was held on 27 November 2011. Voters were asked to decide whether the state was to exercise the termination rights provided in the financing agreement and withdraw its funding for the project (Ministry of State of Baden-Wuerttemberg 2011). The majority of the voters, namely 58.8 percent, voted against the government's obligation to exercise its termination rights and thereby dissolve the state's contractually agreed financing obligations; 41.2 percent voted for this option. Voter turnout was 48.3 percent (Statistical Office of the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg 2011; see Haug 2012, 446–466).

The material point is that a referendum is decided by the majority of valid votes. Accordingly, the law would have been adopted if at least one third of the eligible votes had decided in favour of it (constitution of the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg). This highlights a sensitive issue of democracy theory. In the end, the referendum brought about a situation that pacified the opposing sides (advocates of the project were the majority). However, even if the opponents had been in the majority and, moreover, the necessary quorum had been achieved, this still would not have inevitably meant the end of Stuttgart 21. Why? Simply because the decision that was taken did not concern the project as such but only the share of funding that was to be borne by the state. If, in this case, the state had withdrawn from the project, substantial payments for claims for damages

would have arisen. Even though the project partners would have been able to uphold the project from a legal point of view, it would have been a highly controversial matter to assert such a project politically against the will of the people, who had clearly spoken out against the concrete question of the funding, and it would have provoked further protests. The most problematic constellation would have arisen if the opponents had achieved the majority; however, without the required quorum. At that point at the latest, the issue no longer would have been the train station at all; instead, it would have concerned questions of insufficient possibilities of direct participation at the state level. Then associated aspects would have become the concrete and central issue of the debate. Following the referendum, construction work gradually began and continues to this day.

## 4 NEO-INSTITUTIONALIST OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES BASED ON LEARNING THEORY

The project has gained more institutional validation since the referendum. However, it would have proven very difficult to stop it even before the referendum. At the most, the variant described last would have been an option, at least theoretically. Various approaches provide ample evidence in support of this, particularly such neo-institutionalist concepts as historical and actor-centered institutionalism (Reiners 2008, 319–320; see Hall and Taylor 1996; Kaiser 2001; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Schmidt 2008; Mahoney and Terrie 2008; Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

The approaches underscore that institutions form preferences and that such preferences definitely are not predetermined exogenously. The objectives and choice of the means are shaped by the surroundings; however, this occurs without determination, because the perception and interpretation of the actors comes into play between the institution and action. Historical institutionalism emphasizes that institutions evoke path dependencies. Accordingly, this explains why the preferences and voting actions of the actors are pre-structured by long-term institutional channels. They move within a path and the margins of manoeuvre herein are defined by the structures that were formed and behavioural patterns that were practiced in the past (Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth, 1992; Thelen 2001; see Thelen 2002; Lindner and Rittberger 2003; Pierson 2004; Peters, Pierre and King 2005; Shu-Yun Ma 2007; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Peters 2019, 63).

The actor-centered variant basically follows the question as to the results of action embedded in institutions and, although it points out a certain scope of autonomy, it states that the role of institutions is to limit or promote action as well as to influence the interests and perception of the actors (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995, 39–72; Scharpf 2000; see Benz 2001, 75–76; Ostrom 2005, 819–848). A cursory study of the variant shows that it is about how control systems influence the orientation of action, perception or preferences and resources of actors as regards their behaviour and forms of interaction. All in all, the power of institutions to shape action is decisive because it can promote a stimulating or restricting context and, hence, define courses of action. In this connection, it is also noteworthy that the actors are part of an interacting complex constellation of actors; and, therefore, it is improbable that one actor alone would be able to decide the results (Kaiser 2001).

Taking the prior theoretical knowledge gained from neo-institutionalism into consideration, it becomes evident that a reversal of the Stuttgart 21 project had been improbable for a long time. Overall, the institutional patterns of practiced political processes that are rooted in history, various fixed points in the progression of the project and the ensuing path dependencies, which structure the preferences of the actors and, as such, leave barely any room for manoeuvre, have a substantial impact. Termination of the project is rendered illusory, amongst other things, by the decisions taken starting in 1995, the official planning procedure that started in 2001, the relevant decisions taken since 2006, the ensuing contracts and project-related agreements as well as the associated court rulings and, accordingly, the institutionally restrictive context of action in this case. For this reason alone, the arbitration proceedings were merely symbolic. Only the referendum, if it had given an unequivocal signal, could have influenced the project. In this specific case, the context of action forms a highly restrictive clasp around the orientation of the actors, their voting behaviour and resources. Thus, the interaction promoted by the arbitration proceedings did not lead to any substantial new or different results.

Moreover, when the question is raised as to how the design of such projects could be improved in political processes in future, the answer, almost inevitably, turns to premises based on learning theory (Bandelow 2014, 341–370; Reiners 2016; Reiners 2019; see May 1992; Bennet and Howlett 1992; Knoepfel and Kissling-Näf 1998; Sanderson 2002; Stone 2002; Grin and Löber 2007; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). Change – meaning change to other democratic forms, whatever form that may be – frequently is triggered and supported by factors that affect learning. They are based on qualitative changes in the collective structure of reality and relationships and, hence, a new order of structural factors (Nagel 2001, 56–57).

New social practice is learned, in other words invented, and agreed implicitly or explicitly when it proves to be better, more appropriate or meaningful. Accordingly, learning impulses can be explained by deviances from the customary course of an interaction or a disruption of such. This, however, raises the issue as to why systems do not learn. Non-learning and resistance to change (towards more direct democracy) approximates the behaviour of a system. Systems don't learn because they either do not recognize change, dismiss it as being irrelevant and evade it, or redefine the situation in such a way that they can hold onto the established patterns of interpretation (Schreyögg and Noss 2000, 33–62; see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Messeguer 2005; Rose 2005; Freeman 2006; Kerber and Eckardt 2007). In terms of the logic of the system, these kinds of mechanisms are rational because the system reproduces the system mode that is familiar, well-rehearsed and ensures safety; namely, the mode which the actors follow and in which they have proven themselves. Processes of change, therefore, entail focusing on the systemic reproduction tendency and the awareness that many changes can only evolve into a learning process when the designers of the social world are aware of their own (re-) design accomplishment and, hence, the complex and dynamic-recursive correlation between their actions and the structures (Nagel 2001, 61).

In any case, social action goes hand in hand with power relationships. No intervention in existing conditions is possible without power. To all intents and purposes, you can only set those goals, for which you can mobilize sufficient agency. However, social change in this respect must not be understood as enforcing a model that was defined by just a few actors. Social change needs to be understood as a collective process, during which many members learn and/or define new ways of proceeding in regard to social cooperation and conflict; that

is, a new form of social practice is adopted. The only alternative to top-down authoritarian forms is free and unforced expansion and progressively generalized social experimentation; more precisely, collective and institutional learning. It is not a matter of deciding in favour of a new model, rather the point is to initiate a process of change that calls for and involves actions, reactions, negotiations and cooperation. The point at issue is that it is not a project that represents the will of one group, but rather reflects the ability of the various groups involved in a complex system to reach consensus. Accordingly, change cannot happen by simply replacing one condition with a new one. The preconditions for success arise from collective processes which mobilize or create the resources and capabilities of the persons involved that are needed to establish the new circumstances. To be able to develop or define a new (collective) model, it is necessary to break with interests, power relationships, affective mechanisms of protection and intellectual models, as Crozier and Friedberg already pointed out (1979, 18–20 and 246–248).

By no means is change illusory. In view of numerous events, and not least because of the controversy surrounding the Stuttgart 21 project, we already are during a relevant debate – at least in so far as a systemic adaptation is concerned – and usually any change originates from interaction. Learning theories contribute to this process because, contrary to neo-institutional theories, they tend to concentrate even more on the actors. For this reason, continuous and incremental steps most likely will bring about successful implementation; specifically, measures that are backed by overwhelming acceptance, measures exhibiting a distinct policy of information and (at least perceived) participation. In this context, it may be important to actively involve all actors in the envisaged objectives, letting them contribute in a formative manner to the attainment of the goals (Müller and Hurter 2021, 1–54).

Overall, the process showed that the actors had to inevitably submit to a learning experience. By the same token, the mega-project disclosed that the enormous conflicts were significantly weakened during the project: for one, because of the increasing participation of human capital and, for another, because more consideration was given to values. Transparency gave rise to more acceptance and legitimation and, ultimately, fundamental controversies were solved and alienation phenomena were reduced. Nonetheless, it became evident that the gradual increase in participation made the process even more complex, considerably delayed the duration of the project and most likely also increased its costs.

Accordingly, research and empiricism also provide indications as to how such projects could be handled more smoothly in future. In fact, the source of errors can be found in the practical implementation; however, it has been clear for a long time that all changes, and such large-scale projects, induce resistance per se – a commonplace occurrence, so to say. To believe anything else would be unrealistic because it always needs to be borne in mind that nothing is more difficult to carry out than to initiate a new order of things, as Machiavelli already proposed (quoted in Fisch 2000, 117–166). Changes are accompanied by a zone of uncertainty that needs to be overcome (Reiners 2012). This can be achieved in different ways. Nonetheless, a high degree of information and participation most likely is indispensable in connection with such projects.

## 5 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

It is essential that democracy and emancipatory discourses be continued and commented critically. In so doing, it would be expedient to determine whether advocating for more elements of participation makes sense because, in fact, a higher degree of democratic media-based communication in the public sphere is noticeable and is accompanied by faster access to manifold and extremely complex information that may be difficult to process. However, holding formal referendums on their own seems arguable. Notwithstanding, other participatory procedures could be institutionalized, for example, a more comprehensive information policy and/or diverse mediation processes in the run-up to large-scale projects to ensure, so to say, legitimation regarding the subsequent formal procedures. The instrument offered by referendums could be used in connection with substantial decisions – simultaneously and in due time – because it seems that a window of opportunity for involving the people directly in such projects in future may have opened in southwestern Germany. Or perhaps not: Presumably other referendums would not attract as much participation. Moreover, it is difficult to delimit a large-scale project and a substantial decision. In addition, there is the risk of becoming lost in endless discussions, also about where such lines need to be drawn exactly. As a result, the relevant areas of discourse would be pushed to the background and, consequently, states may possibly develop more and more into incapacitated "discussion democracies."

It may prove helpful, for example, to survey public opinion in advance of major projects; specifically, to complement the parliamentary procedure by possibilities of participation if there still are alternatives that need to be discussed. Nonetheless, some aspects need to be considered: Usually only certain interest groups become involved in discussions. That is why the opinion of the people is not represented and why any discussion of the actual circumstances is only supported in part. Furthermore, the prevailing mood plays a part, and it changes continuously. Once again it becomes evident that there is still ample room for scientific research and debate.

From the point of view of political theory, such options seem questionable too: Their strengths in this regard tend to be more symbolic. It seems inevitable that politics will have to apply itself to this learning process from now on. Empiricism will show whether such procedures provide effective help unless this has been demonstrated elsewhere. Nonetheless, significant scepticism will persist. And yet, it is indisputable that the formation of opinion through party channels has suffered over the years and that the political class is increasingly drifting away from the public. Perhaps it would already suffice if the citizens (symbolically) felt that they were being considered and perceived in the political process. The times of top-down politics are over. Accordingly, it may be time to creatively think about alternative ways of political opinion formation in future – without carrying on a general debate about our time-proven system – because the debate will not be rendered moot by the start of construction of the large-scale Stuttgart 21 project. And simply demanding the formalization of referendums will not prove helpful in connection with large-scale projects either. In conclusion, it needs to be pointed out that highly legitimated direct participation counteracts the capacity for exercising control and solving conflicts and, if anything, blocks innovations.

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## PRIMERJAVA NEPOSREDNE DEMOKRATIČNE IN PREDSTAVNIŠKE PARTICIPACIJE – VZROKI IN ODZIV NA KRIZO PREDSTAVNIŠKE DEMOKRACIJE

*V zadnjem času se razprava o težavah pri komuniciranju in izvajanju vladne politike ne samo stopnjuje, temveč dobiva vse več pozornosti glede domnevnih pomanjkljivosti predstavniške demokracije, ki postajajo očitne v Zvezni republiki Nemčiji. Razprava postavlja tudi vprašanje ali bi ta razvoj lahko omilili z dopuščanjem bolj neposrednih demokratičnih oblik sodelovanja ali pa bi te dejansko ovirale inovacije. Kontroverzni železniški projekt Stuttgart 21 je le en primer, ki ponazarja obravnavano vprašanje, pri čemer je treba opozoriti, da razprava sega tudi v zvezne parlamente. V članku z namenom poglobljenega razumevanja primerjamo različna razmišljanja o predstavniških in neposrednih demokratičnih oblikah participacije ter ob tem obravnavamo vprašanje, ali bi bila modernizacija vlade korak v pravo smer, pri čemer ne bi bilo produktivno spremeniti smeri delovanja zgolj zato, da bi sprejeli drugačno različico sistema. Kljub temu ostaja vprašanje, kako je mogoče v prihodnosti bolje upravljati tako obsežne vladne projekte, kot je Stuttgart 21. Akademske raziskave dajejo odgovore na to vprašanje.*

**Ključne besede:** neposredna demokracija; predstavniška demokracija; likvidna demokracija; referendumi; politično sodelovanje; politika modernizacije vlade.

# BOTTOM-UP RESPONSE: THE ROLE OF MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES IN COMPENSATING AND SUPPORTING CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

**Silvia RUČINSKÁ, Miroslav FEČKO, Ondrej MITAĽ and Michal JESENKO**[1]

*Coping with crisis scenarios, explicitly highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic, has shown the necessity to adapt and to find feasible solutions for state governments and self-government's execution of tasks and responsibilities. In Slovak Republic's conditions, the central government transferred the execution of several response activities onto municipalities and cities. In addition, citizens naturally expected and demanded solutions from the local self-government representations, which are seemed more closely to them. The aim of the paper is to identify and analyse bottom-up response activities from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Innovative solutions, stressing out the use of ICT, proposition of state-of-the-art approaches in providing services for the citizens will be highlighted.*

**Key words:** municipalities; cities; competences; public policy; crisis scenarios.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary municipalities and cities exist within the dynamically changing social reality. Regarding to the concept of good governance, municipalities execute their competencies within decentralized and open structures or networks, which might improve governing of territorially defined public issues in conformity with the development of certain territory (Nilssen 2019, 103;

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Kovač 2015, 10). Municipal level of public administration must reflect the newest trends that might enhance the democratic governance. Regardless of the various challenges it faces, local self-government creates a platform between the state and society, which enables the sustainable development and functioning of the society (Peters and Pierre 2018, 11–13). Local self-government creates local public policies, exercise its competences and thus face current challenges.

Current position and importance of municipalities and cities is strengthened thanks to decentralization and subsidiarity, which are because of their universality applied in nearly every democratic state governed by the rule of law (Kákai 2021, 704–706; Cordeiro Guerra and Lastra-Anadón 2019, 295; Koprić 2017, 41). Decentralization also allows public policies to reflect local preferences and demands, because municipalities and cities are responsible for almost all public administration functions (Cerniglia, Longaretti and Zanardi 2021, 377; Benčina, Kozjek and Rakar 2021, 11). Municipalities and cities have a natural tendency to face modern trends and challenges, thanks to which they can enrich their own functioning, but mainly improve the provision of services to citizens and entrepreneurs living and residing in the given territory (Ručinská and Fečko 2020, 389). Consequently, citizens consider the municipality level as the nearest to their everyday life needs, both in a safety and crisis time. Bottom-up approaches of municipalities and cities to solving problems and unknown situations seem to be crucial factor during crisis situations and in the context of crisis management of a given territory. Based on abovementioned, we presume that municipalities and cities compensate and support central government´s role, especially during crisis situations.

The aim of the paper is to identify and analyse bottom-up response activities from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Our intention won't be to identify every single possible bottom-up response over the past years, but to highlight selected examples which underline the irreplaceable role of municipalities, cities and municipality associations in crisis situations. The examples will be presented as case studies, following the approach of identifying public choices, public outputs and public impacts in each response activity. Innovative solutions, stressing out the use of information communication technologies, proposition of state-of-the-art approaches in providing services for the citizens will be highlighted.

## 2 MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES AS SELF-GOVERNMENT ENTITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The spatial structure in the Slovak Republic is very fragmented. With 5,4 million inhabitants living in the Slovak Republic in 2021 the overall number of municipalities was according to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022b) 2890 in the same year 2021. As shown in the Table 1, most of the municipalities can be considered as rather small or medium sized ones. In total 2755 municipalities had less than 5 thousand inhabitants living in them, which also includes municipalities such as Príkra with 12 inhabitants, Ondavka with 14 inhabitants, Havranec with 15 inhabitants, Bystrá with 16 inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022a). Compared with very fragmented structure of local self-government, the Slovak Republic also has two cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, namely Bratislava with 475,577 inhabitants and Košice

228,070 with inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022a). Two biggest cities are under a special law which also defines their city districts that are viewed in many ways as a standard local self-government unit.

TABLE 1: SIZE GROUPS OF MUNICIPALITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2021

| Size group according to the number of inhabitants | Number of municipalities |
|---|---|
| 199 or less | 412 |
| 200 – 499 | 707 |
| 500 – 999 | 749 |
| 1 000 – 1 999 | 584 |
| 2 000 – 4 999 | 303 |
| 5 000 – 9 999 | 67 |
| 10 000 – 19 999 | 32 |
| 20 000 – 49 999 | 27 |
| 50 000 – 99 999 | 7 |
| 100 000 and more | 2 |

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022b).

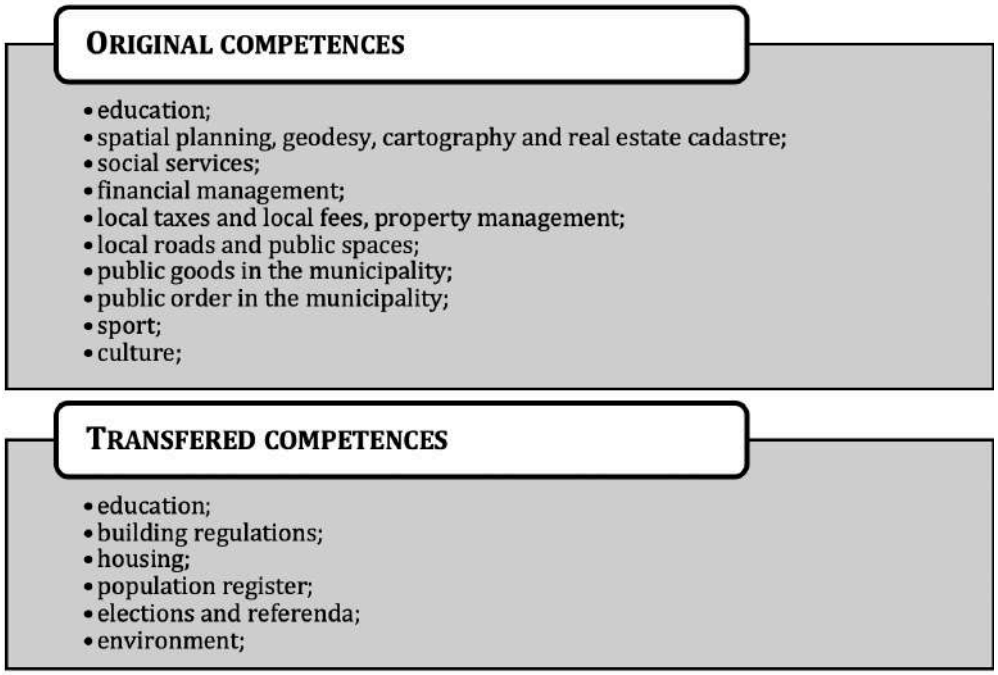
The municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic are grouped into two main municipality and city associations, the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and the City Union. The Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia was established in 1990 and with 2784 municipalities being a part of it, it unites almost every municipality into this non-governmental organisation (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2019). The City Union was established in 1994 and currently unites 54 different cities across the Slovak Republic (City Union 2021, 2–4). Both associations fulfil an irreplaceable role in coordinating activities, formulating good practice, supporting common goals and needs of its members.

As part of the decentralization and deconcentration reforms over the past decades in the Slovak Republic (Ušiaková 2022, 295; Klimovský, Pinterič and Jüptner 2019, 198–200; Vernarský 2019, 72–73; Kováčová 2015, 106–110), municipalities gained different competences reflecting their important role in the society and public policy. Competence in general represents a summary of authority and scope, which the legislation grants to a certain public administration body for the purpose of fulfilling entrusted tasks (Králik and Kútik 2013, 50–51; Škrobák 2012, 10). Authority is understood as a summary of authorisations, rights and obligations, that a public administration body has for the needs of fulfilling assigned tasks and for the implementation of which it is responsible. The scope is then a territorially and factual defined circle of social relations managed by a specific public administration body. Consequently, the tasks of public administration are perceived as matters decomposing long-term society goals on which the political consensus of the relevant entities has been achieved, because they reflect public interest and overall societal conditions. Goals can be characterized as a desired state and tasks as a specific procedure to achieve this state (Hendrych 2014, 70–73; Vačok 2012, 27–28).

Municipalities and cities fulfil in the Slovak Republic two main types of competences, which are original competences and transferred competences. The Act no. 369/1990 on municipal establishment, as amended (§4, section 4) also stated an interpretation rule, whereby if the law doesn't explicitly mention, that it is the exercise of transferred competence, it is applied that it is the exercise of

the self-government original competence of the municipality. In this sense, original competences are seen as the representation of independent decisions of municipalities about the administration of the municipality and of its property. On contrary, transferred competences can be transferred to municipalities only based on law and with an appropriate financial coverage of such competences. The Act no. 416/2001 on the transfer of certain competences from state administration bodies to municipalities and higher territorial units, as amended, but also several other special laws in the past can be considered as representation of such transfer by law. The Figure 1 shows just a representation of the competence's division between original and transferred competences.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF ORIGINAL AND TRANSFERRED COMPETENCES OF THE MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC




Source: Act no. 369/1990 on municipal establishment, as amended; Act no. 416/2001 on the transfer of certain competences from state administration bodies to municipalities and higher territorial units, as amended.

Municipalities and cities exercise their competences independently of other public power subjects, whereas not even the exercise of transferred competences makes the municipalities and cities a subordinate entity (Kadečka 2012, 111–114). An important topic to be stressed out is also the fact, that every municipality, regardless of its size, financial or administrative background, has the same number of competences. Thus, even the smallest municipality is according to law equipped with original and fully transferred competences, as any bigger city in comparison. The financing of transferred competencies is financed is guaranteed by the state, while original competences must be financed by the financial resources of municipality or city.

## 3 MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES AS POLICY ACTORS

Municipalities and cities realize their activities in particular territory. Their aim is to formulate and realize public policies, mainly in accordance with specific local public interest. Put differently, local self-government units can promote specific requirements and needs of local communities into public policies. Their role in public policy process is very specific. Municipalities and cities are affected and inseparable from the policy process. In this regard, municipalities and cities must be perceived as a relevant actor in public policy process, whose importance is supported by the overall public trust.

### 3.1 The role of municipalities and cities in the policy process

The generally accepted definition of public policy actors is that they are involved in the policy process, and their aim is to influence the outcome of this process, both in various parts of the policy process and at different levels of governance. The involvement of actors usually depends on the nature of the public policy problem of a specific area of the national economy, which can be of the nature of (1) production area - industry, agriculture, construction, forestry, or (2) non-production area - education, health, culture, science and research, defence, and security. In this sense, public policy actors usually realize social priorities of public interest in a one particular or in more different areas, while public policy process can be influenced by different actors and different interests (Malíková 2018, 28; Scharpf 1997, 521).

As it was stated by Knoepfel, Larrue, Varone and Hill (2011, 39) actors including local self-government units can take part in the emergence, identification and resolution of a problem defined politically as a public one. Municipalities and cities may fully initiate or influence the course or outcome of the policy process that they are involved in (Potůček 2017, 71). In other words, they are involved in a process of exploration of what can be achieved together with other actors, what problems can be solved, and how (Dunlop, Radaelli and Trein, 2018, 7). Municipalities and cities concentrate their power and resources to provide various types of public services, mainly with the aim to increase the quality of life in particular territory.

From the practical point of view the important role of municipalities and cities as policy actors is irreplaceable, as it was proven many times in various local public issues, such as community and sustainable development (Keller, Fehér, Vidra and Virág 2015, 79–82; Weiland, Hickmann, Laderer, Marquardt and Schwindenhammer 2021, 93; Mayer and Keyes 2005, 6–14), improving population health (Naylor and Buck 2018, 72; Cutler and Miller, 2005), social inclusion and welfare (Jeffrey 2017, 7), governing of the climate issues (van der Heijden, Patterson, Juhola and Wolfram 2019, 369–371; Kern 2019, 140–141), or economic growth and territorial marketing (Rizzi, Ciciotti and Graziano 2018, 173–175). At the same time, the role of local self-government is also very important during various natural and man-made crisis and emergency situations (Kuhlmann, Hellström, Ramberg and Reiter 2021, 556–557; Tošić, Karović and Domazet 2021, 285–286; Kapucu 2012, 541–542). Mentioned specific local issues correspond with the division between original and transferred competences of municipalities and cities. As it is generally known, both types of competences are being executed continuously and on a long-term basis.

Municipalities and cities must realize their activities toward the public interest within the public policy process, as well as various other types of policy actors. Public policy process has been constantly discussed by the theoreticians because this idea of modelling the policy process was introduced by Lasswell in 1956. Based on the growth of the field of public policy, several different variations of the stages, substages and typologies has been described by researchers and scholars. Stages of public policy process represent ideal and the most used concept that covers public policy activities in real practice.

According to the Potůček (2017, 105) public policy process starts with problem delimitation and problem recognition, continues with formulation and decision-making, implementation and finishes with evaluation. Howlet, Ramesh and Perl (2020, 100) identified four basic stages of policy cycle that consist of problem delimitation and recognition, policy decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation. Jann and Wegrich (2007, 43) argue that public policy process can be differentiated between agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Public policy process described through the complex cycle includes agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, assessment and adaptation (Dunn 2018, 43). Reasonable description of public policy process was also described by the Cairney (2016) who divides the policy cycle into six stages, namely agenda setting, policy formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation and policy maintenance, succession or termination. Following a various mentioned approaches to policy process, agenda setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation, have become the conventional way to describe activities of relevant actors in a process of formulation and solving of public issues.

The success or failure of the policy process is very often evaluated within three levels, public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts, which were defined by Peters (1993, 4) as a framework for the subject of public policy that reflects connection between policy actors, public policy process and public interest. Public choices can be defined as decisions of legitimate authorities (governments, politicians, cities and municipalities, unions, NGOs and many other actors) about the implementation of public policy (Konečný 2021, 30; Peters 1993, 4). Policy outputs can be considered as activities connected with the implementation of the policy that are used with clear purpose, mainly to provide public goods and public services (Potůček et al. 2015, 133; Peters 1993, 4). Policy impacts represent the summary of all long-term effects resulting from the realized public policy, such as different types of societal changes, changes in behaviour or attitudes, economic growth or improvement of public health (Dunn 2018, 255; Peters 1993, 4). In our opinion, the selected approach can be perceived as an appropriate tool for examining how municipalities and cities compensate and support the central government´s role, mainly during crisis situations. In this sense, the attention can be put on public policy and purpose of realized activities of relevant policy actors.

### 3.2 Involvement of municipalities and cities in policy process and their public trust

The specific role and position of the municipalities and cities in public policy process is defined by their characteristic as the smallest territorial parts of the democratic states governed by the rule of law. Simultaneously, it must be said that the role of municipalities and cities depends on their capacity to organise themselves and exercise their own, independent choices within the forms and

structures of governance that exist at local level (Harding and Brendan 2015, 27). In this regard, the specific conditions, legal and institutional framework of local self-government in the Slovak Republic were mentioned in the previous text.

Within the institutional framework, the position of municipalities and cities is strengthened by national associations of municipalities, both within policy process and democratic governance. In this regard, national associations of municipalities also must be perceived as an important public policy actor. Associations of self-government units fulfil the role of speakers and represent all units towards the national level and their bodies, mainly parliament and government (Janas and Jánošková 2022, 60). National associations of local self-government units take active part in public policy process and have various roles, mainly contribution to legislative process, promotion of modern and innovative citizen-centred governance methods, participation in national and international forums, support municipalities in their execution of competences (Kołsut 2018, 4). National municipal associations also help municipal level to demonstrate their effectiveness to give confidence to citizens and to governments that they can manage the responsibilities that decentralisation brings (Council of Europe 2007, 1). As a result of new challenges of municipalities and cities, their nature and functions have continued to evolve (Romeo 2010, 1). National associations of municipalities were created intentionally, mainly to strengthen the position of municipalities and cities and to promote mutual interests of municipal level in each country.

The importance of national associations corresponds also with the existence of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the only platform that brings together the national associations of local and regional governments from 40 European countries. National associations of local self-government units help municipalities and cities promote their interest in relations to governments, but also within the wider European perspective. However, associations cannot execute the competences of municipalities and cities. In this regard, the final formulation and implementation of national and local public policies depends on the decisions of municipalities and cities.

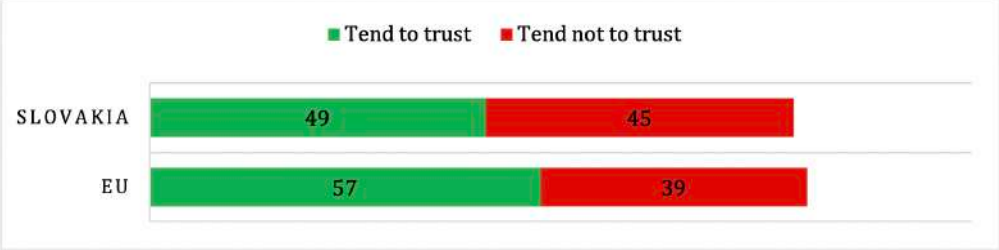
Municipalities and cities can be perceived as actors with natural tendency to face modern trends and challenges, thanks to which they can enrich their own functioning and execution of original and transferred competences, but mainly improve providing of public goods and quality of life. As an irreplaceable actor in policy process, municipalities and cities can participate in national public policies, as well as create their own specific local public policies. Sometimes, the voice of the lowest level of public administration is the only one that can affect the outcome of higher level of public policies in current states. Put differently, central governments are often unable to register and solve all public issues at the municipal level of governance. In other cases, municipalities and cities must react very quickly, because central governments need some time to formulate and implement local public policy. This tendency is also underlined by the fact that municipalities and cities represent the level of governance, which can be considered as the nearest to citizens´ everyday life needs.

We see the important and irreplaceable role of municipalities and cities in the society and in the state not only as the result of legislative regulations and division of competences, but also as a natural consequence of the trust which the inhabitants place in the municipalities and cities. Phenomenon of trust, determined by people´s satisfaction with public services, political-cultural

variables, demographic factors, governance quality or various structural features of society, may have a crucial role in solidifying social support for democratic rule itself (Gudžinskas 2017, 8; Christensen and Lægreid 2005, 505–507).

According to the Eurobarometer 96 (European Commission 2022, 34) as seen in the Figure 2, when the respondents have been asked about the trust in regional or local authorities, the results show, that in the Slovak Republic 49% of the respondents tend to trust the regional or local public authorities. The overall average in the European Union is with 57% higher, but despite that, in comparison to other public authorities in the Slovak Republic, the trust in regional or local public authorities is significant.

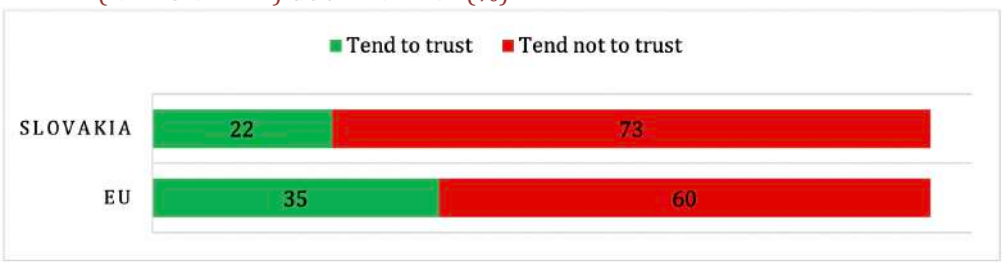
FIGURE 2: EUROBAROMETER 96: HOW MUCH TRUST DO YOU HAVE IN CERTAIN INSTITUTIONS? FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS, DO YOU TEND TO TRUST IT OR TEND NOT TO TRUST IT? REGIONAL OR LOCAL PUBLIC AUTHORITIES (%)




Source: European Commission (2022, 34).

Comparing the trust of the respondents in regional or local public authorities with for example the national government, highlighted in the Figure 3, shows that only 22% of the respondents tend to trust the central government (European Commission 2022, 36). Also, in this regard the overall European Union average is with 35% higher, but the comparison between the Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrates, that the respondents in the Slovak Republic tend more to trust in local authorities than in the central government.

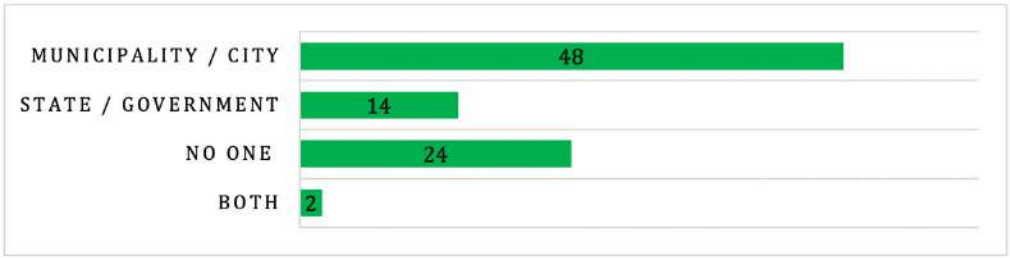
FIGURE 3: HOW MUCH TRUST DO YOU HAVE IN CERTAIN INSTITUTIONS? FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS, DO YOU TEND TO TRUST IT OR TEND NOT TO TRUST IT? THE (NATIONALITY) GOVERNMENT (%)




Source: European Commission (2022, 36).

The Slovak Republic specific statement about the trust in local public authorities can be supported also by the survey presented by the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (2021a), which was conducted in February 2021. The respondents have been asked one question: "When you as a citizen (as a person) get into difficult life situations and problems caused by coronavirus, who helps you more to solve them? Who do you rely on more – the state (government) or your municipality (city)?". The results as highlighted in the Figure 4 show, that most respondents tend to rely on the municipality which they are a part of. The difference in reliance between municipalities and the state / government is significant also in this survey, as it was in the Eurobarometer 96.

FIGURE 4: SURVEY ON ATTITUDES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC




Source: Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (2021).

The issue of trust in public body authorities, in this case in the municipalities can be seen as important in different crisis scenarios. This was also confirmed by Kukovič (2022, 17) when concluding, that the countries with higher trust in decision makers have been able to adopt Covid-19 pandemic measure more efficiently, in comparison with countries with a lower trust, where measures resulted into scepticisms and doubts. The bottom-up response of municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic in crisis scenarios, supported by the trust in municipalities and cities could have had a significant impact in coping with Covid-19 pandemic and reacting to other crisis situations emerged in the recent past. Activities of various policy actors including Associations of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and various private non-governmental initiatives helped to mitigate negative impacts of crisis situations (Meneguzzo et al. 2021). Municipalities and cities, generally develop response activities for addressing natural disasters and other unknow crisis or emergency situations, as it was discussed in many studies (Glinka 2021, 61–63; Prebilič and Kukovič 2021, 542; Edelenbos, van Buuren, Roth and Winnubst 2017, 60–64; Guerrero, Bodin, McAllister and Wilson 2015, 8). Thus, the following sections of this paper will focus on case studies highlighting response activities of the municipalities and cities, including municipality associations, which supported and compensated the role of the central government.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The ambition of the study is to contribute to a constructive dialogue about the role of municipalities and cities in compensating and supporting central government's role. The aim of the study is to examine the role of municipalities and cities as policy actors during crisis situations. More precisely, the study aims to answer the research question whether the bottom-up responses activities of municipalities and cities helped to mitigate or resolve crisis situations.

In this sense, study analyses, with the use of case study method, bottom-up responses from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including Covid-19 pandemic. Selected cases of bottom-up crisis response activities realized by Slovakian municipalities and cities were analysed between 2020 and 2022.

Theoretical base of this study is composed of relevant scientific papers as well as international documents processed by international organizations. Theoretical part also includes legal framework and status quo of local self-government in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. This part concentrates its attention on the importance of municipalities and cities in contemporary states governed by the

rule of law, as well as underlines the role of municipalities and cities as an actor in the policy process.

The case studies represent the appropriate tool, which was used to demonstrate how bottom-up response activities of the municipal level compensate and support central government's role. Each of case studies include description of the problem and background information on crisis situations, as well as the purpose of public policy process defined by the theory as public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts. This approach focused on selected public policy aspects was explained in chapter 3.

In the paper, the methods of content analysis, abstraction, comparison and synthesis were involved. Comparison was made between selected approaches to mitigate or resolve public issues during crisis, which were used by municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic. This method helped to identify different approaches of municipalities and cities in compensating and supporting central government's role. The comparison was realized with the focus on selected structure of case studies. Content analysis was used to analyse the response activities of municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic. More precisely, content analysis was used to determine the presence of bottom-up response activities within given qualitative data (documents, press releases, news and information published on websites, etc.). Abstraction was used in the context of filtering those aspects of selected local self-government units´ activities, which were relevant for our research. The method of synthesis was used to systematize new ideas and findings based on our research, as well as to draw conclusions resulting from the analysis.

## 5 CRISIS RESPONSE ACTIVITIES OF THE MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES

Following three cases studies are covering examples showcasing activities of municipalities, cities and national municipality associations as response activities regarding realisation of online municipality council's meetings, online Covid-19 testing registration and Ukraine refugee and migration crisis. Simultaneously, case studies emphasize the role of national municipality associations in the promotion of the interest of the local self-government and enforcement of mutual legitimate interests of municipalities and cities.

### 5.1 Case 1 – Municipality council's online meetings

Because of the crisis and restrictions in personal meetings due to the Covid-19 pandemic, municipalities and cities were faced with the inability to organized council's meetings in person. Therefore, it was necessary to formulate and execute new public policies for proper functioning of self-government bodies.

**Public choices:** Several stakeholders, government, parliament, municipalities, municipality associations, formulated the need for legislative change to enable online council's meetings with the result of adopting the Act no. 73/2020 on the amendment of some laws within the scope of the Ministry of interior of the Slovak Republic in connection with the disease COVID-19, as amended in April 2020. The adopted law formulated transitional provisions during an extraordinary situation, a state of emergency or an exceptional condition in connection with the disease Covid-19 (altogether indicated as crisis) according to which a proper functioning of self-government bodies should have been enabled.

**Policy outputs:** Based on the newly adopted legislation, municipalities and cities were able to organize council's meetings online, using videoconference or other communication technology tools. The law, or the central government in this matter, didn't provided concrete methodological guidelines how to do so, or how to finetune nuances of the overall online meeting's management. The Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia reacted to this need in April 2020 with a recommendation manual (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2020) for municipalities and cities, which helped the self-governments to organize online council's meetings. The recommendations specified and suggested a go-to approach in the field of organisational measures before the first online council's meeting and suggestions for the amendment of the rules of procedure of the municipality council. We can claim that the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia stepped into the implementation of the public policy with clearly formulated recommendations and compensated the central government's role in case of online council's meetings.

**Policy impacts:** As a result of the implemented public policy, the municipality council's meetings were able to be organized online and a continuation of municipalities competence's execution was secured.

### 5.2 Case 2 – Online Covid-19 testing registration

Covid-19 pandemic required to implement various measures and governments had no chance to avoid negative impacts of these measures. Various approaches were implemented to mitigate negative impacts of each wave of pandemic. The Government of the Slovak Republic decided, to realize mass Covid-19 testing of citizens, which was the main part of the government's Covid-19 response policy. First obligatory mass testing of the citizens was realized at the end of October 2020, while citizens had an obligation to obtain certificate of negative Covid-19 test until the end of the second wave. In this regard, mass testing was realized as a response to the second wave of the pandemic, which took place in Slovakia from September 2020 to April 2021. Online registration of citizens of a similar scope has not yet been implemented in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, and government had not even created conditions for the implementation of this obligation. However, online registration was the best way how to manage mass Covid-19 testing of citizens.

**Public choices.** As a reaction on the growth of confirmed cases, the Government of the Slovak Republic created Covid-19 response policy. Government transferred responsibility for the result on to municipalities and cities. However, the financial coverage was not immediate, but the reimbursement of costs was realized with a delay of several months. Organizational part of the process was partly provided by the state, mainly logistical distribution of antigen tests and basic security aspects coordinated by the Slovak Armed Forces. Administrative and personnel aspects, as well as the performance of this transferred competence, was fully executed by local self-government units. The implementation of mass Covid-19 testing was difficult to organize, but municipalities and cities were perceived as the only part of the public administration that can organize and coordinate basically all the citizens. Municipal level is responsible for the organizing all types of elections. This competence is also transferred competence but is not realized online. However, municipalities and cities, as the most innovative component of public administration, is naturally looking for ways to make the execution of each competence more efficient. From this point of view,

the citizens primarily demanded the minimization of the waiting time before the test and while waiting for the test result. This ambition was reachable only through the electronization of the whole process.

**Policy outputs.** The result of local self-government policies helped to make mass Covid-19 testing more efficient. Registration systems for mass testing rounds have been developed by the municipalities and cities as their own innovative activity. Through separate web portals of municipalities and cities, it was possible to register for testing, choose a testing location and obtain the result of the testing itself electronically. In 2021, thanks to the initiative of the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia, a national wide registration system MOMs - Momky na dlani /MOMs - Moms in the palm of your hand/ was created (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2021b). This registration system was created as an opportunity for smaller municipalities and cities to handle mass testing, because separate web portals were created mainly by the larger self-government units. Thanks to another integrated registration system, citizens could easily register for mass testing, while this system was more centralized and offered opportunities even in smaller municipalities and cities to register for testing and receive the result of test electronically. At this point we must mention that the state at central level subsequently also created a registration system during 2021.

**Policy impacts.** The impact of the innovative approach of municipalities and cities was the simplification of citizens' access to Covid-19 mass testing registration and time savings. Simultaneously, municipal level helped to achieve higher quality of life during the pandemic, as the test result itself was needed when visiting essential shops and later also when entering employment. Thanks to the innovative solutions provided by the municipalities and cities, the citizens had at least a little more comfort in the context of anti-pandemic measures applied by the Government of the Slovak Republic.

### 5.3 Case 3 – Ukraine refugee and migrant crisis

Member states of the European Union are successfully managing the refugee and migrant crisis caused by the military conflict in Ukraine. Mainly border countries with Ukraine have been solving this problem almost immediately from the beginning of the conflict, also the Slovak Republic. Towards the end of August 2022, 90,416 refugees from Ukraine were registered for temporary protection and 713,588 Ukrainians crossed Slovak border with Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict (UNHCR 2022). This situation was by its nature and impacts new, unknown, and in this context, it was necessary to evolve new or reformulate existing public policies.

**Public choices.** Government responded with declaration of aid (legal, economic, social). However, municipalities and cities were directly affected by waves of individuals who needed immediate assistance after crossing borders. In this regard, municipal level had to coordinate various types of other policy actors, mainly NGOs, businesses, churches and individual volunteers. Government created national response policy focused on accommodation housing support, while central government will refund accommodation costs to the property owner. The realization of this competence was transferred to municipalities and cities. However, there were no exact instructions prepared by the central government. Also, in this case, the bottom-up response of municipal level was

very important to manage immediate challenges caused by the armed conflict on the Ukrainian territory.

**Policy outputs.** As a practical results, Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia elaborated and created various tools that helped municipalities and cities to provide various public services. National registration system for the accommodation housing of refuges was created by the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and associated partners (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022d). Simultaneously, model decisions for councils in connection with humanitarian aid were published (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022c). During the first month of the conflict, Guide for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools was published (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022a), as well as centralized online portal Helping Hand for Ukraine for overall aid management was created (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022b).

**Policy impacts.** Municipalities and cities have been affected as the first responding part of public administration. Direct and indirect impacts can be identified in the context of various public interests, mainly public order and public health. Simultaneously, bottom-up response of municipal level helped to satisfy basic human needs of refugees, as well as provide aid by citizens, business and other policy actors more effectively. In this regard, bottom-up response of local self-government helped to mitigate negative impacts of the Ukrainian conflict, both from the refugee's point of view and execution of municipal and city competences.

## 6 CONCLUSION

There is no substitute for the municipalities and cities and their important role to overcome basic various challenges of the 21. century, but also crisis, unknown or emergency situations. Municipalities and cities must be perceived as policy actors with an ability to formulate own local public policies and influence formulation and implementation of the national public policies.

Bottom-up response of municipal level on to crisis has been proven in the Slovak Republic. The research confirmed the irreplaceable role of national municipality associations during crisis situations, mainly their position as the main platform for sharing of good practice examples and creator of national-wide guides and innovative solutions. The activities realized within presented case studies correspond with the high level of trust in municipal level. Summing it up, the research also confirmed the irreplaceable role of municipalities, cities and municipality associations in compensating and supporting central government's role in crisis situations.

Municipalities and cities compensate central government´s role, both during the formulation and implementation stages of public policy process. As a result, this role directly influence creation of new or change of existing original and transferred competences of local self-government units. Case studies were focused on situations where the state did not react quickly enough. However, municipalities and cities had to deal with the situation immediately, but without guidance from the state. Supporting role of municipalities and cities can be perceived as implementation of state´s national response policies. In this regard, municipal level executes transferred competences, because government usually

just made decision and municipal level must find the effective solutions for policy implementation. As it was proven by our case studies, compensating role has its limits, namely insufficient guidelines from the state, ad hoc solutions, insufficient or late financing of transferred competences.

To conclude, the benefit of the article is associated with fostering an interest in the examined issues of bottom-up response activities of municipalities and cities, which use innovative approaches to influence public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts. In this regard, municipalities and cities, as a policy actor, can influence the quality of public services and quality of life considerably, also in the crisis situations.

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# ODZIV OD SPODAJ NAVZGOR: VLOGA OBČIN IN MEST PRI NADOMEŠČANJU IN PODPORI VLOGE CENTRALNE VLADE

*Obvladovanje kriznih scenarijev, ki so bili eksplicitno izpostavljeni v času pandemije Covid-19, je pokazalo na nujnost prilagajanja in iskanja izvedljivih rešitev za izvajanje nalog in pristojnosti državnih vlad in lokalnih oblasti. Na Slovaškem je centralna vlada prenesla izvajanje več aktivnosti odzivanja na nastalo situacijo na občine in mesta. Poleg tega so občani upravičeno pričakovali in zahtevali rešitve od predstavništev lokalne samouprave, ki se jim zdijo bližje. Namen prispevka je na primeru Slovaške identificirati in analizirati aktivnosti odzivanja v kriznih situacijah, vključno s pandemijo Covid-19, od spodaj navzgor, torej občin in mest, ki jih močno podpirajo interesne skupine in združenja občin in mest. V članku so izpostavljene inovativne rešitve s poudarkom na uporabi IKT, predlagani pa so tudi najsodobnejši pristopi za zagotavljanje storitev za državljane.*

**Ključne besede:** občine; mesta; kompetence; javna politika; krizni scenariji.

# MEASURING QUALITY OF SUBNATIONAL DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATIC COMPETITION AND PARTICIPATION IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONS, 1998–2020

**Pavel MAŠKARINEC**[1]

*The present article aims to contribute to a better understanding of quality of subnational (regional) democracy in post-communist Czech Republic and Poland. Following Dahl's procedural definition of democracy, we focus on two theoretical constitutive dimensions of democracy – participation and competition – and understand high-quality democracy as a type defined by a combination of high levels of both participation and competition. By analysing all six regional elections since the establishment of self-governing regions in both the Czech Republic and Poland, we found that neither Czech nor Polish regions can be consistently classified between the four categories of quality of democracy defined, namely high-quality democracy, uncompetitive participatory democracy, competitive non-participatory democracy, and limited democracy. The substantial inter-electoral oscillation of quality of democracy types at the level of both countries as well as individual regions is primarily caused by a highly limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness, as opposed to highly stable participation levels.*

**Key words:** quality of democracy; subnational democracy; regional elections; Czech Republic; Poland.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy studies have a long tradition. The conditions contributing to democratization have become one of the important questions in this field of research (Lipset 1994; Geddes 1999; Teorell 2010). However, despite a comprehensive body of research on quality of democracy at the national level (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Diamond and Morlino, 2004; Roberts 2010; Bühlmann et al. 2012), only a very limited number of studies have explored

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quality of democracy at subnational levels.

Most scholars thus overlook that democracy may vary across territories (McMann 2018; Schakel and Massetti 2018) although it was almost five decades ago that Dahl's seminal book (1971) referred to the choice of analysing democratization at national level (so-called "national regimes") as "a grave omission", arguing that opportunities for contestation and participation (two of Dahl's dimensions of democratization) may considerably differ between a country's subnational units (Dahl 1971).

The topic of quality of regional democracy is particularly important for two reasons. First, the importance of its measurement is associated with the continuing process of transfer of policy competences and powers from central to regional government, which resulted (approximately since the 1970s) in the emergence of many regions as full-fledged democratic political systems (Dandoy et al. 2018), together with regional differentiation of processes such as political representation, participation, competition, or accountability (Loughlin et al. 2011). Second, this research gap also exists because there is only a very limited theoretical and methodological framework to assess quality of regional democracy and, at the same time, it is challenging to collect comparable data – and the lack of existing datasets prevents an effort to explain how various dimensions and factors of democratic quality account for observed differences at the regional level.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we seek to offer a research design for evaluating quality of democracy and assessing to what extent quality of regional democracy varies within and across countries. Our second aim is to use this research framework to analyse quality of subnational democracy (and its variation) in Czech and Polish regions.[2] So, we analyse data on electoral competition in all six regional elections from the establishment of self-governing regions in Poland (1998) and the Czech Republic (2000) to the most recent regional elections in 2018 (Poland) and 2020 (the Czech Republic) in 16 Polish voivodships (*województwo*) and 14 Czech regions (*kraj*).[3]

This paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the existing literature on quality of democracy. In the second part, the theoretical framework on quality of subnational democracy is presented. In the third part, the methods of analysis are introduced. In the fourth part, an analysis of quality of subnational democracy in Czech and Polish regions is presented, and then the concluding section formulates some implications of the results for further research.

## 2 MEASURING QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

As we mentioned above, democracy studies have a long tradition. At the same time, a large part of the authors studying democratization processes emphasize

[2] Generally, the term subnational can refer to both local and regional level. In this paper, the term subnational democracy refers to regional democracy unless otherwise stated.

[3] The Czech and Polish regions were selected as case studies because while they differ in some aspects, as for instance size (see Swianiewicz 2011, 2014b; Janas and Jánošková 2022), the main similarity is that regional governments in both countries have relatively narrow functions compared to municipalities (see Swianiewicz 2014a) and they score very low on the level of legal authority (so-called the Regional Authority Index – RAI) in the domains of 'self-rule' within the region and 'shared rule' within the country (see Hooghe et al. 2008; Marks et al. 2008).

that the field's current central question is no longer whether a political system can be deemed democratic but rather how a stable democracy can be established and how it can be maintained in good shape so that citizens remain satisfied and engaged. Thus, the issue arises of evaluating the quality of democracy and its variability between countries (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Levine and Molina 2011; Bühlmann et al. 2012).

However, most of the research at subnational levels has focused rather on the spatially uneven nature of democracy and democratization between regions or the persistence of less democratic or authoritarian enclaves within national-level democracies, especially in some selected areas such as Russia (Saikkonen 2016) or Latin America (Giraudy 2013), or only on some aspects of regional politics such as party competition (Schakel 2017), the executive branch (Schakel and Massetti 2018) or quality of governance (Charron et al. 2014). This is also true for Czech and Polish research, where previous studies have especially focused on form of electoral competition and demonstrated that Czech and Polish regional elections can be deemed second-order national elections. As such, they are less important for the workings of the political system because they only decide about institutions with weaker responsibilities and make no direct impact on the functioning of national executives (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Furthermore, as second-order, Czech and Polish regional elections were dominated by nationwide campaign issues and parties, with changing trends in national-level party support followed at the subnational levels of government (Gagatek and Kotnarowski 2017; Šárovec 2017; Pink and Eibl 2018; Gagatek and Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2020; Kouba and Lysek 2021).

Overall, democracy research at the regional level is rather limited, recent, and far-from-systematic in terms of empirical scope and theoretical development, compared to research at the national level. One of the exceptions is a study of Dandoy et al. (2018), who present a design for analysing institutional characteristics of subnational political systems, including the democratic and policy outcomes of regional institutions. While the authors' aim was to adapt Lijphart's approach (2012), differentiating between consensus and majoritarian democracies as a tool to measure the variation in subnational patterns of democracy, they focused more on institutional patterns of regional democracy (and their impact on democratic performance and socio-economic public policies) than on quality of democracy. More importantly, their attempt was limited to listing possible indicators for measuring patterns of subnational democracy, without operationalizing them.

A partly similar (and much more empirical) approach was taken by authors who tried to verify whether subnational patterns of consensus and majoritarian democracies exist within federal states. Here, Vatter and Stadelmann-Steffen (2013) replicated Lijphart's analysis in three federal states of Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and Bernauer and Vatter (2019) also included the United States in the analysis. Overall, the results of the above-mentioned studies can be summarized by Vatter and Stadelmann-Steffen's (2013) claim that Lijphart's two dimensions of democracy can be distinguished at subnational level as well. This, however, resulted in the formulation of an important question for further research: Do the various models of regional democracy make a difference for quality of democracy?

Furthermore, even the most developed democratic ranking systems (e.g., the Democratic Barometer or the Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] Project) capture

only a limited set of indicators associated with subnational levels. For instance, V-Dem includes indicators of elections, government authority and constraints, and civil liberties. However, as these indicators evaluate especially the freeness and fairness of subnational elections or participatory opportunities for citizens (e.g., their legal framework rather than the real level of participation in these processes), they measure level of democracy rather than quality of democracy. Thus, while they can serve as a useful tool to identify subnational political units that are less or more democratic than their national regimes (we understand democratic national regime as a precondition for evaluating quality of democracy), they cannot adequately evaluate the varying quality of democracy across several dimensions in individual subnational units of a specific country or in cross-country comparison.

Finally, most of the works concerning quality of democracy ignore subnational levels, although attention to subnational politics can help to expand knowledge in many areas such as theories of democratization and regime change, regime typologies, development, or governance (McMann 2018). More importantly, this more fine-grained (subnational) focus offers several other advantages: (1) increasing the number of observations and thus mitigating the limitation of a small-N research design; (2) strengthening the capacity to accurately code cases and thus make valid causal inferences; (3) better handling the spatially uneven nature of major political processes (Snyder 2001).

## 3 CONCEPTUALIZING QUALITY OF SUBNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Before we focus on conceptualizing the quality of subnational democracy, one important issue must be mentioned which is associated with conceptualizing quality of democracy as such. There is no clear agreement either on defining democracy as a root concept or on how it is to be measured. Therefore, the first objective of this paper is to describe existing approaches and subsequently to present a conceptualization or a theoretical framework enabling us to address some problematic issues of quality of democracy research.

As most studies of democratic quality at the national level employ Dahl's (1971) procedural definition of democracy (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Diamond and Morlino, 2004 Levine and Molina 2011; Bühlmann et al. 2012; Gwiazda 2016), we follow this approach as well. According to the procedural definition, quality of democracy depends on the role of institutions and their mutual relations. Moreover, we assume that the concept of democratic quality should rest on both a normative and an empirical basis. The normative basis serves to define standards for evaluating democratic functioning, while the empirical basis shows the extent to which those standards are met by existing democracies (Roberts 2010). Therefore, higher quality of democracy should be indicated by higher consistence of empirical cases with the definition of democracy as a quality of democracy benchmark (Lauth 2016).

The theoretical approach of the paper is, therefore, based on the assumption that a principal role in quality of democracy assessment is played by analysis of the institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy, thus by the procedural conception of democracy and the view of democracy as a political system providing citizens with legal opportunities for participation and contestation. These are reflected in real patterns of behaviour, giving citizens and organized civil society the tools to check on politicians and political institutions.

They thus meet democratic standards such as representativeness, responsibility, equality, and participation. However, an analysis of democratic quality based on a procedural delimitation should avoid both the minimal (electoral) definition of democracy (Schumpeter 1943[2006]) and the maximalist approach (Ringen 2011; Geissel 2016) based on assessing policy outputs and responsiveness – because the inclusion of social and economic equality (as the output dimensions of the political system) "over-stretches" the concept of democratic quality and leads to evaluating the effectiveness of government in terms of socio-economic performance instead of democratic quality in terms of procedures (Gwiazda 2016).

Therefore, we regard democracy as a set of institutions and procedures, as well as institutional accountability of procedures, that allow for democratic governance and decision making, free contestation, institutionalized constraints in the exercise of political power, measures to make government accountable to people, and citizens' opportunities to participate (as politically equal individuals) and effectively express their preferences for alternative policies (thus to influence government) when choosing their political representatives in free and fair elections. Finally, as our conceptualization is based on Dahl's procedural democracy, we focus especially on two theoretical dimensions of democratization (or quality of democracy), namely inclusiveness (participation) and liberalization (contestation) (Dahl 1971) and conceptually, we understand the democracy as a regime type defined by a combination of high levels of participation and competition.

## 4 METHODS

### 4.1 Effective participation

In studies of democratic quality, political participation is closely associated with political equality (Diamond and Morlino 2004; Bühlmann et al. 2012) and represents one of Dahl's (1971) theoretical dimensions of democratization, namely inclusiveness, which refers to the extent of one's right to participate in political life. In Dahl's approach, participation reflects the right to participate in the decision-making process rather than the real level of electoral participation, whereas other authors (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Bühlmann et al. 2012) argue that the dimension of inclusiveness reflects not only one's degree of political participation or the extent of the right to vote (equality of participation) but also the actual level of both electoral and non-electoral participation.

Despite some opposing views (Rosema 2007), most authors agree that political participation is one of the basic indicators of democratic quality (Lijphart 1997), people's active involvement in the political process is a necessary condition of successful democratic functioning, and low voter turnout is symptomatic of a crisis of democracy (Norris 2002) or people's dissatisfaction with its functioning (Karp and Milazzo 2015). A higher level of participation, thus, makes government activities more responsive to broader segments of the population (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002) – something that can be best achieved when participation is as widespread as possible, because different social groups participate differently in elections, and less affluent individuals are systematically affected by low levels of electoral participation. This results in unequal influence of different population groups on political decision making (Lijphart 1997) and violates one of the fundamental normative assumptions of democracy, namely that every

citizen of the democratic polity should have equal influence on political decision making (Dahl 1989). For those reasons, we use the level of voter turnout in elections to regional assemblies in the Czech Republic and Poland as an indicator of so-called effective participation, because any changes in the level of voter turnout may signify growing mobilization of discontented population groups and a crisis of the democratic regime's legitimacy that potentially jeopardizes its stability. However, to ensure equivalence of the values of participation with the indicator of competition, we divide voter turnout by 100, so the value of effective participation ranges along a scale from zero (0% turnout) to 1 (100% turnout).

## 4.2 Effective competition

Concerning the dimension of competition, political parties continue to be the main means of channelling people's demands into the political decision-making process. Furthermore, free party competition or contestation is one of the fundamental conditions of democracy. [4] This is reflected in Dahl's (1971) dimension of liberalization, which refers to the extent to which political opposition can compete for power. Therefore, if the party system is viewed as a system of interactions arising from interparty competition (Sartori 2005), the quality of those interactions represents the central focus of quality of subnational democracy in the dimension of contestation/competition. Furthermore, there is a consensus that vibrant contestation is a necessary condition for democracy because it implies electoral uncertainty of the party competition, as no actor is sure who will win the election, so called "institutionalized uncertainty" (Przeworski 1991, 14) and the stable patterns of interparty competition is also one of the necessary conditions of democratic consolidation (Morlino 1995).

Like in the case of participation, we measure the competitiveness dimension using the effective version of the indicator, partly building on an operationalization presented by Altman and Pérez-Liñán (1999, 2002). They define effective competition as one where opposition parties enjoy access to policy making and the extent to which they can present an alternative to the government coalition – or as the vote share differential between government and opposition parties. Government parties are defined as those represented in the legislature (here regional assembly) and belonging to a formal government coalition (here regional government), whereas opposition parties are all other parties represented in the regional assembly and not directly participating in regional government, although they may support that government in some cases (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002; Centellas 2011). Thus, legislative coalitions are not considered government coalitions.

As it is important to penalize party system fragmentation (or fragmentation of assembly, more precisely), Altman and Pérez-Liñán (2002) created the "typical party" in government and in the opposition by weighting the shares of seats in favour of the largest parties. The size of the "typical party in government" is, then, calculated as:

$$G = \frac{\sum g_i^2}{\sum g_i}$$

where $G$ is the size of the typical government party and $g_i$ is the share of seats for

[4] Dahl (1971) refers to the liberalization dimension interchangeably as liberalization, political competition, competitive politics, public contestation, and public opposition.

the *i*-th government party. By analogy, the size of a "typical opposition party" is calculated as:

$$O = \frac{\sum o_i^2}{\sum o_i}$$

where $O$ is the size of the typical opposition party and $o_i$ is the share of seats for the *i*-th opposition party. In the final step, Altman and Pérez-Liñán use the values of $G$ and $O$ to calculate their index of competitiveness (C) as follows:

$$C = 1 - \left| \frac{G - O}{100} \right|$$

The value of $C$ tends to zero whenever the government (or the opposition) controls the whole legislature and to one when there is a balance between government and opposition; thus, growing competitiveness is indicated by growing $C$ values and decreasing competitiveness by a decline of $C$. The competitiveness index is a measure of potential contestation (rather than closeness in the races) and considers any consociational agreement dividing the legislative seats to be effective power sharing, even if distribution of votes is not that even (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002, 98).

Centellas (2011), among others, points to the strength of this solution (calculating weighted $G$ and $O$) in identifying the relative size of the government and opposition blocs instead of their mere aggregate seat shares (Centellas argues that the latter fails to reflect fragmentation and the individual parties' seat shares). At the same time, this calculation assumes that one-party governments with a large share of seats in the legislature are more effective at implementing their policies than multi-party government coalitions, even if both control the same aggregate number of seats in the legislature (Centellas 2011, 13).

At the same time, the fact that $G$ and $O$ are calculated as weighted means of the seat differential between government and opposition parties' results in two characteristics of the competitiveness index. On one hand, the index provides a very good indication of situations when the main (or even the only) government party is considerably stronger than all other parties (whether in government or opposition). On the other hand, it performs much poorer when coalitions consist of equally strong parties, which may especially be a problem in multiparty systems with balanced party sizes, including most Czech regional party systems.[5] For that reason, we opt for calculating the competitiveness index based on aggregate seat shares of government ($G$) and opposition ($O$) parties, rather than their weighted seat shares.

Finally, we consider the issue of quality of democracy in Czech and Polish regions following Dahl's (1971) typology, with four regime types constructed along the dimensions of participation and competition: 1) closed hegemonies (low

[5] For example, for a single-party government enjoying an absolute majority of 55.56 or 62.0% of the seats, $C$ equals 0.664 and 0.554, respectively, indicating a steep decline of competitiveness (the Podlaskie and Subcarpathian voivodeships in the 1998 elections). In contrast, for a two-party coalition backed by 64% of the seats (where the stronger party alone has 54% of the seats), $C$ rises to 0.818 (Pomeranian voivodeship in the 1998 election) and similarly, a two-party coalition with 71.11% of the seats where the stronger party alone does not have more than half of the seats results in a relatively high $C$ level (0.796), which does not fully correspond with the real strengths of the government and opposition blocs (Holly Cross voivodeship in the 1998 election).

participation, low competition); 2) inclusive hegemonies (high participation, low competition); 3) competitive oligarchies (low participation, high competition); and 4) polyarchies (high participation, high competition) (see Dahl 1971, 6–9). Nevertheless, as our analysis builds on the effective version of both dimensions' indicators, we use a different terminology in line with Centellas' (2011) study of quality of democracy in Latin America (Table 1).

TABLE 1: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY BASED ON THE DIMENSIONS OF COMPETITION AND PARTICIPATION

| | **Low participation** | **High participation** |
|---|---|---|
| **High competition** | Competitive non-participatory democracies | High-quality democracy |
| **Low competition** | Limited democracies | Uncompetitive participatory democracies |

Source: Author, according to Dahl (1971) and Centellas (2011).

In the two-dimensional approach to quality of democracy assessment, it is important to define the cut-off points between "high" and "low" levels of competition and participation. Here, Centellas chooses two solutions. The first choice (Centellas 2011) is based on 50% cut-off points (or the 0.5 value more precisely) and the second (Centellas 2000) on the values of 0.4 in the case of participation and 0.6 for competition.

Nevertheless, both these solutions are problematic because Centellas fails to explain why he chose those cut-off points between low/high participation and competitiveness. Using the value 0.5 in the Czech and Polish cases is problematic especially for participation, as voter turnout did not exceed 50% in either of the six Czech regional elections in either region; the situation was only slightly more favourable in the Polish case, as most voivodeships did pass the threshold (albeit by relatively low margins) in the 2018 elections but few did in the other elections. For this reason, the cut-off points proposed by Centellas fail to provide relevant differentiation of quality of democracy between the different regions of Poland and Czechia.

Similarly, if the second definition of cut-off points were used, at 0.4 for effective participation and 0.6 for effective competitiveness, respectively, more than two-thirds of Czech regions (58 cases or 69.0%) would be classified as competitive non-participatory democracies, while the other types would be only weakly represented. Again, this solution would not sufficiently reflect the divergent forms of quality of democracy across regions.

For these reasons, an alternative solution was designed. After calculating basic measures of central tendency (separately for each regional election in Czechia and Poland), we defined the cut-off points of 0.36 for effective participation and 0.78 for effective competitiveness in the Czech case and 0.47 for effective participation and 0.80 for effective competitiveness in the case of Poland.[6]

Even a basic comparison reveals a much higher classification performance for the cut-off points used by us. Whereas Centellas' cut-off points concentrated more

[6] The Czech dataset of all regional elections exhibits the following values of central tendency: effective participation index – mode (0.284), median (0.364), mean (0.360); effective competitiveness index – mode (0.800), median (0.800), mean (0.780). The Polish regional election dataset exhibits the following values of central tendency: effective participation index – mode (0.459), median (0.467), mean (0.474); effective competitiveness index – mode (0.889), median (0.851), mean (0.796).

than two-thirds of Czech cases in the competitive nonparticipative category and left the other types with only limited representation, our definition of cut-off points led to a much better differentiation of quality of democracy between regions. More specifically, then (see below for more details), the different types range from almost one-fifth to one-third (for Czech regions) and from one-seventh to one-third (for Polish voivodeships).

There is one disadvantage to the solution proposed by us: defining cut-off points separately for each country makes subsequent comparison difficult. On the other hand, especially in the case of participation, there may exist significant country differences in voter turnout because of contextual factors (e.g., different extent to which regional elections are second order based on different levels of autonomy of regional councils, or the authority in self-rule and shared rule exercised by regional governments). As a result, a common definition of cut-off points might obscure those contextual differences and misrepresent quality of democracy in the individual countries.

## 5 QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONS

In the first step, a descriptive analysis of the development of the effective participation and effective competitiveness indexes reveals low levels of interregional variability (in terms of the coefficient of variation), especially for voter turnout. This suggests an overall rather minor oscillation of electoral participation and competitiveness in the different regions.[7] Especially, values of effective competitiveness are almost the same in both countries, both minimum, maximum and mean. In contrast, values of turnout vary much more, when average turnout in Polish regional elections is more than 10 percentage points above the Czech case.

More specifically, whereas the mean values of participation in Czech regions range between 0.309 (Karlovy Vary) and 0.409 (Prague), competitiveness lies in the range of 0.689 (Zlín) to 0.874 (Plzeň). Similarly, Polish regions exhibit values of effective participation between 0.425 (Opole) and 0.519 (Holy Cross) and a competitiveness index ranging from 0.624 (Kuyavia-Pomerania) to 0.914 (Lublin).

TABLE 2: AGGREGATE LEVELS OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020

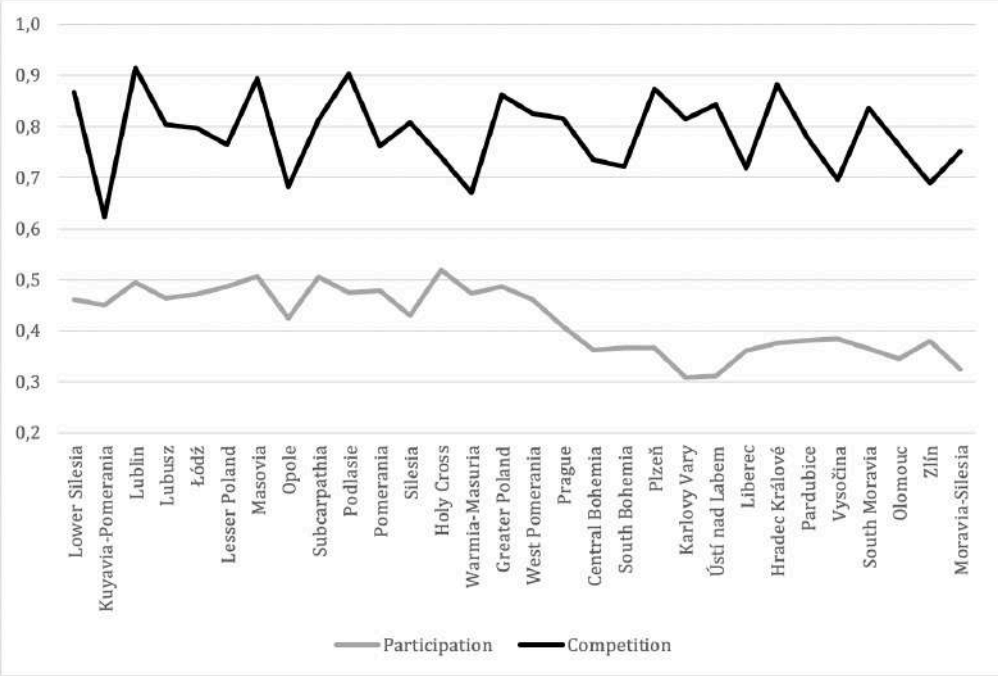
| | Lowest | Highest | Mean | Coefficient of variation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participation – Czech Republic | 0.250 | 0.464 | 0.360 | 12.6 |
| Participation – Poland | 0.380 | 0.610 | 0.474 | 9.0 |
| Competition – Czech Republic | 0.364 | 0.985 | 0.780 | 19.6 |
| Competition – Poland | 0.333 | 1.000 | 0.796 | 19.5 |

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

[7] Coefficients of variation were used to indicate relative variability. Expressed as a percentage, the coefficient is calculated as standard deviation ÷ mean × 100% and shows the variability of a random variable's probability distribution. The higher the coefficient of variation, the higher the differences between units of observation.

However, a much more interesting question is whether the levels of participation and competition vary between regions, as well as between consecutive elections within regions. To start with interregional differences (Figure 1), there is considerable variability, especially in the case of competitiveness. At the same time, these differences are much higher in Poland, where the governing parties have strong dominance in some regional councils (especially the Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Warmian-Masurian, and Opole voivodeships). But also in the Czech Republic, there are several regions where the opposition has only small influence on regional political decision making (e.g., the Zlín, Vysočina, Liberec, South Bohemian, and Central Bohemian regions). In the contrasting case of participation, the differences between individual regions are much smaller, although some regions again show very low values of voter turnout in the long-term comparison (the Opole and Silesian voivodeships in Poland, or the Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem and Moravian-Silesian regions in the Czech Republic).

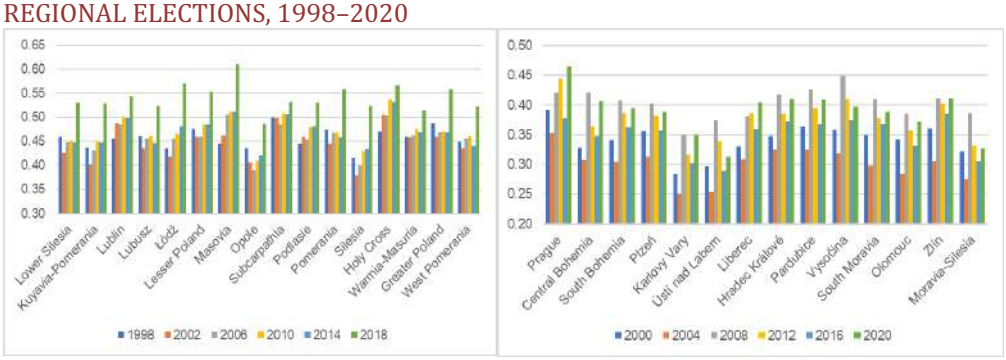
FIGURE 1: AGGREGATE LEVELS OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020 (MEANS)




Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

On the other hand, significant differences in both dimensions also exist within specific regions. Here again, variability is much smaller in the case of effective participation, with constant levels across almost all regions, and transformations of the index are associated with an overall rise or decline of participation in specific elections, e.g., in Poland's most recent regional elections of 2018. More specifically, effective participation in Czech regions ranges between 0.250 (Karlovy Vary) and 0.464 (Prague), whereas Poland exhibits values from 0.380 (Silesia) to 0.610 (Masovia). More importantly, there is a much smaller variance in electoral turnout between Polish regional elections (apart from the 2018 elections) than in the Czech case.

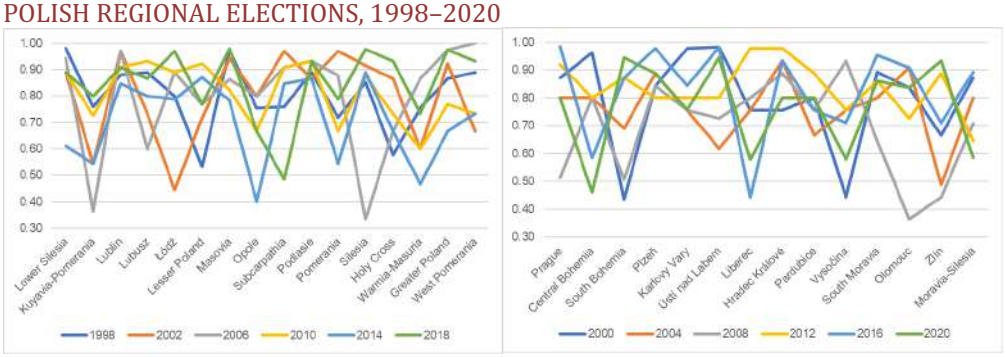
FIGURE 2: VALUES OF THE EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEX FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020




Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

Compared to participation, the competitiveness index tends to significantly change within one region between elections, so that a region that had low competitiveness in one election may have a very high level of competitiveness in another election and vice versa. This finding applies to both countries, as only three regions in the Czech Republic (Plzeň, Karlovy Vary and Hradec Králové) and three in Poland (Lublin, Podlasie, Masovia) exhibit relatively a constant index of competitiveness without a significant decrease. In contrast, the balance between governing and opposition parties varies considerably in most regions. For instance, the Silesian voivodeship exhibits a range between 0.333 and 0.978, the Łódź voivodeship between 0.444 and 0.970, the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship 0.467 and 0.867, or the Subcarpathian voivodeship between 0.485 and 0.970. Similarly, the index of competitiveness in Czech regions varies considerably in the South Bohemian Region (between 0.436 and 0.945), Liberec (0.444 to 0.978), Vysočina (0.444 to 0.933), or Zlín (0.444 and 0.933).

FIGURE 3: VALUES OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS INDEX FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020




Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

The above-mentioned conclusion is also confirmed by the values of the correlation coefficients between successive elections for both indexes (Table 3). Here, too, we see a very strong correlation in the case of participation. Correlation coefficients for regional turnout between consecutive elections in the Czech Republic range from 0.78 (the elections in 2008 and 2012) to 0.91 (2000–2004), or in the case of Poland from 0.69 (2014–2018) to 0.96 (2010–2014). In the contrasting case of competitiveness, the correlation values are medium at most (0.26 for 2004–2008 in the Czech Republic and 0.29 for 2014–2018 in Poland, with one exception in each country) and in some cases, we even see a trivial or negative relationship. The above findings demonstrate an extremely limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness in the different regional assemblies, in stark contrast to extremely stable levels of electoral participation.

TABLE 3: INTER-ELECTORAL STABILITY OF THE EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVENESS AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION INDEXES FOR CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020

| | Participation – Czech Republic | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **2000** | **2004** | **2008** | **2012** | **2016** | **2020** |
| **2000** | - | 0.912 | 0.784 | 0.919 | 0.856 | 0.823 |
| **2004** | | - | 0.802 | 0.920 | 0.879 | 0.919 |
| **2008** | | | - | 0.775 | 0.779 | 0.657 |
| **2012** | | | | - | 0.885 | 0.884 |
| **2016** | | | | | - | 0.885 |
| | **Participation – Poland** | | | | | |
| | **1998** | **2002** | **2006** | **2010** | **2014** | **2018** |
| **1998** | - | 0.201 | 0.236 | 0.257 | 0.142 | 0.403 |
| **2002** | | - | 0.204 | 0.187 | 0.218 | −0.034 |
| **2006** | | | - | 0.010 | −0.009 | −0.044 |
| **2010** | | | | - | 0.859 | 0.181 |
| **2014** | | | | | - | 0.293 |
| | **Competitiveness – Czech Republic** | | | | | |
| | **2000** | **2004** | **2008** | **2012** | **2016** | **2020** |
| **2000** | - | 0.208 | 0.037 | −0.160 | 0.220 | −0.073 |
| **2004** | | - | 0.256 | −0.123 | 0.274 | −0.276 |
| **2008** | | | - | 0.052 | −0.242 | −0.498 |
| **2012** | | | | - | −0.228 | 0.224 |
| **2016** | | | | | - | 0.643 |
| | **Competitiveness – Poland** | | | | | |
| | **1998** | **2002** | **2006** | **2010** | **2014** | **2018** |
| **1998** | - | 0.201 | 0.236 | 0.257 | 0.142 | 0.403 |
| **2002** | | - | 0.204 | 0.187 | 0.218 | −0.034 |
| **2006** | | | - | 0.010 | −0.009 | −0.044 |
| **2010** | | | | - | 0.859 | 0.181 |
| **2014** | | | | | - | 0.293 |

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

In the final step of our analysis, we attempt to classify quality of democracy in individual regions along the dimensions of participation and competition. Table 4 summarizes the results of simultaneous analysis of both dimensions (participation and competitiveness). Even a basic comparison of the cut-off points defined by us with those used by Centellas demonstrates a much better classification performance of our solution, with a relatively even distribution of regions into the different segments of the graph (Figure 4). Thus, the most frequently occurring type in the Czech Republic is high-quality democracy (33.3%), followed by competitive non-participatory democracy (26.2%), limited democracy (21.4%), and finally uncompetitive participatory democracy (19.0%). The most common variant among Polish regions is competitive non-participatory democracy (30.2%), followed by high-quality democracy (29.2%), limited democracy (25.0%), and finally uncompetitive participatory democracy (15.6%).

TABLE 4: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020 (PERCENTAGES)

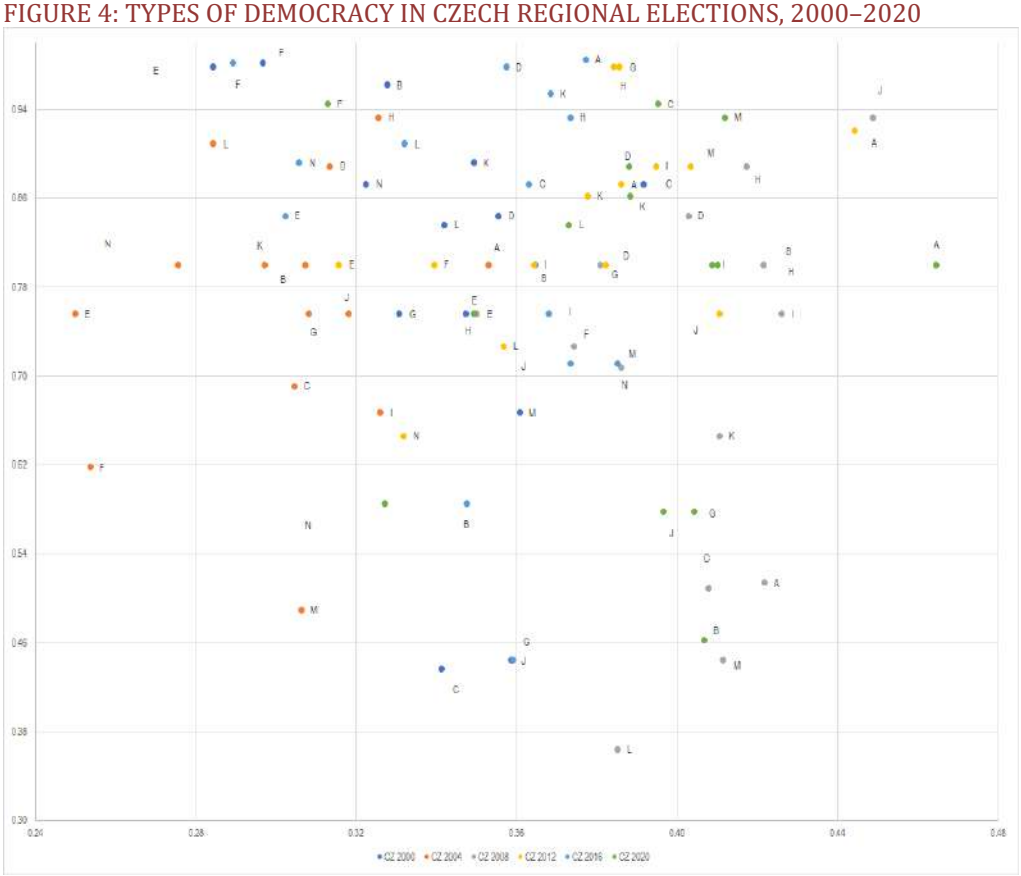
| **Region** | High-quality democracy | Competitive non-participatory democracy | Uncompetitive participatory democracy | Limited democracy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Czech Republic** | 33.3 | 26.2 | 19.0 | 21.4 |
| **Poland** | 29.2 | 30.2 | 15.6 | 25.0 |

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

Beyond the mere enumeration of types and their proportions for the entire period of observation, a much more interesting question is whether some regions consistently fall within one of the above types or whether quality of democracy tends to strongly transform between regional elections. The distribution of Czech and Polish regions based on both dimensions of democracy is summarized in Figures 4 (Czech Republic) and 5 (Poland). It is immediately apparent that in neither country can most regions be assigned consistently, in the long-term, to one of the types defined (for better clarity, Appendix 1 summarizes the occurrences of each type in concrete regions). Despite that, several conclusions can be drawn.

To begin with the Czech Republic, the first finding is that high-quality democracy is primarily typical of Bohemian regions, which account for three out of four cases (4 cases were observed in Prague, followed by 3 cases in South Bohemia, Plzeň, Pardubice, etc.). Among Moravian regions, more occurrences (3) were only observed in South Moravia, and the overall situation would not change much even if Vysočina was reclassified as a Moravian region.[8] Then again, even some Bohemian regions were never classified in the high participation, high competitiveness category, namely Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem. The same applies to the Moravian-Silesian region in Moravia – and all three are the so-called structurally disadvantaged regions.

FIGURE 4: TYPES OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020

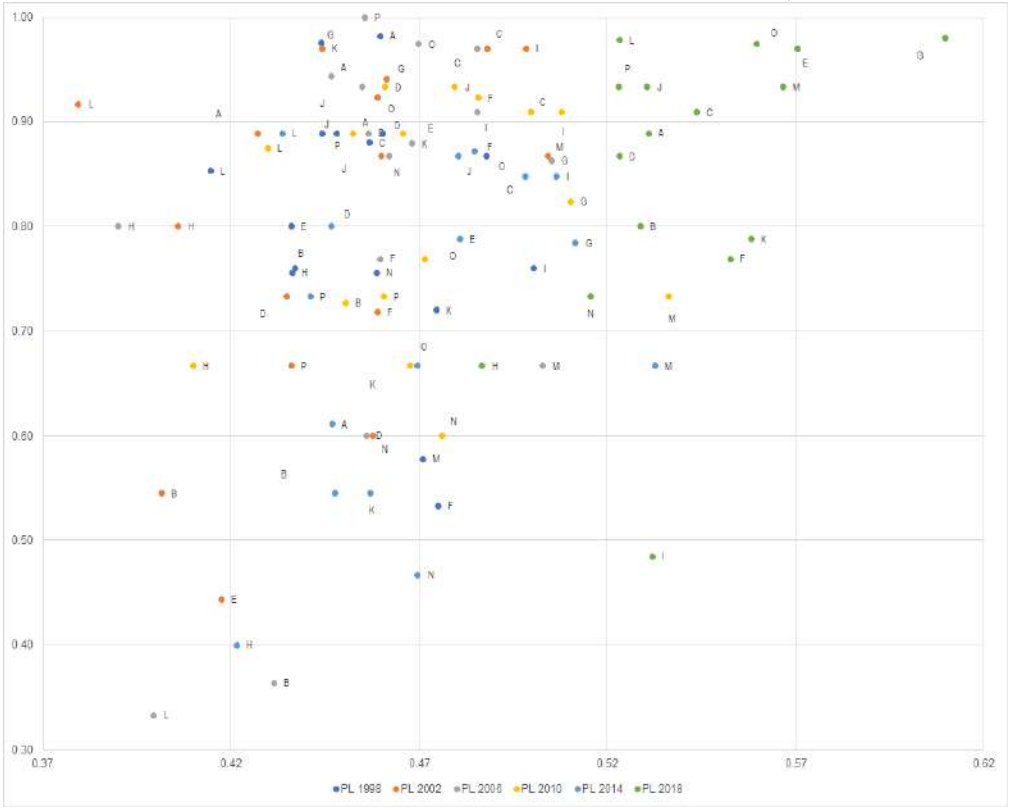



Source: VOLBY.CZ, authors' own calculations. Note: A) Prague; B) Central Bohemia; C) South Bohemia; D) Plzeň; E) Karlovy Vary; F) Ústí nad Labem; G) Liberec; H) Hradec Králové; I) Pardubice; J) Vysočina; K) South Moravia; L) Olomouc; M) Zlín; N) Moravia-Silesia.

[8] Vysočina is the only Czech region stretching across the former land boundary between Bohemia and Moravia. Of the five former administrative districts that were merged into it, three belong to Moravia and two to Bohemia.

On the other hand, it cannot be confirmed that all these three structurally disadvantaged regions belong to the limited democracy category. Although the category, too, is dominated by Bohemian regions (two out of three), with the most occurrences in Karlovy Vary, but also Liberec (three each); two occurrences of limited participation and competitiveness were also observed in the Moravian-Silesian and Vysočina regions. Similarly, Bohemian regions dominate the category of competitive nonparticipative democracies (almost two out of three), especially those in the country's west and northwest (Ústí nad Labem in 4 cases and Plzeň and Karlovy Vary in 3 cases). In Moravia, then, the combination of low voter turnout and a power balance between government and opposition is most often (in 3 cases) seen in the Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian regions. Finally, uncompetitive participative democracy is the only one of the four categories dominated by Moravian regions, after including Vysočina (3 occurrences, like Zlín), yet two occurrences are only observed in the Bohemian region of Pardubice.

FIGURE 5: TYPES OF DEMOCRACY IN POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020



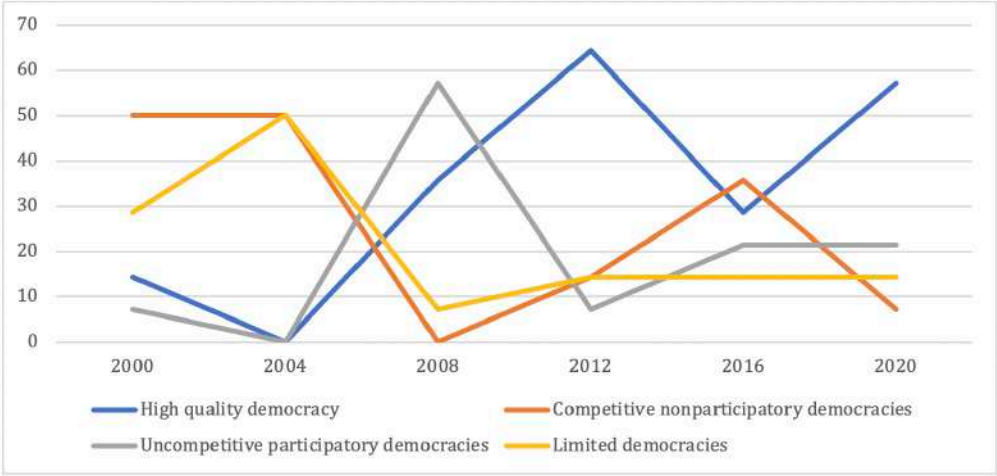

Source: PKW, authors' own calculations. Note: A) Lower Silesia; B) Kuyavia-Pomerania; C) Lublin; D) Lubusz; E) Łódź; F) Lesser Poland; G) Masovia; H) Opole; I) Subcarpathia; J) Podlasie; K) Pomerania; L) Silesian; M) Holy Cross; N) Warmia-Masuria; O) Greater Poland; P) West Pomerania.

Moving on to Poland, high-quality democracies again concentrate in a part of the country, namely a contiguous territory of the three borderland voivodeships of Lublin (5 cases), Subcarpathia (4 cases) and Podlasie (3 cases) along with the south-eastern region of Holy Cross and the east-central Masovian region (3 cases). In contrast, all other regions exhibit only isolated occurrences of the combination of high participation and competitiveness. The next category of limited democracies is populated by the north-central region of Kuyavia-Pomerania (5 cases) along with two seaside regions – West Pomerania a Warmia-Masuria – and the southwestern region of Opole (each with three occurrences in the category). The combination of low voter turnout with balance between governing and opposition parties, then, is populated by 4 cases in regions bordering the Czech Republic,

Lower Silesia and Silesia, followed by the neighbouring regions of Lubusz and Łódź, and the north-eastern region of Podlasie (each with 3 occurrences in the category). In contrast, for the combination of high voter turnout and dominance of government parties in regional assemblies, which is generally the weakest category in Poland, there is only one region with at least 3 cases – Holy Cross.

The final question to attempt answering here is whether the proportions of the different types of democracy change over time. The development in Czech regional arenas (Figure 6) does not substantiate a clear answer to that question because the types strongly oscillate between elections. Perhaps the only rather apparent trend is the declining proportion of regions in which the combination of high participation and low competitiveness has been observed since the elections of 2012 (uncompetitive participatory democracies) or of limited democracies, where few occurrences of the combination of low voter willingness to participate in electing political representatives and dominance of government parties have been observed since the elections of 2008. Nevertheless, there is strong inter-electoral oscillation of the occurrence of high-quality democracies and competitive non-participatory democracies.

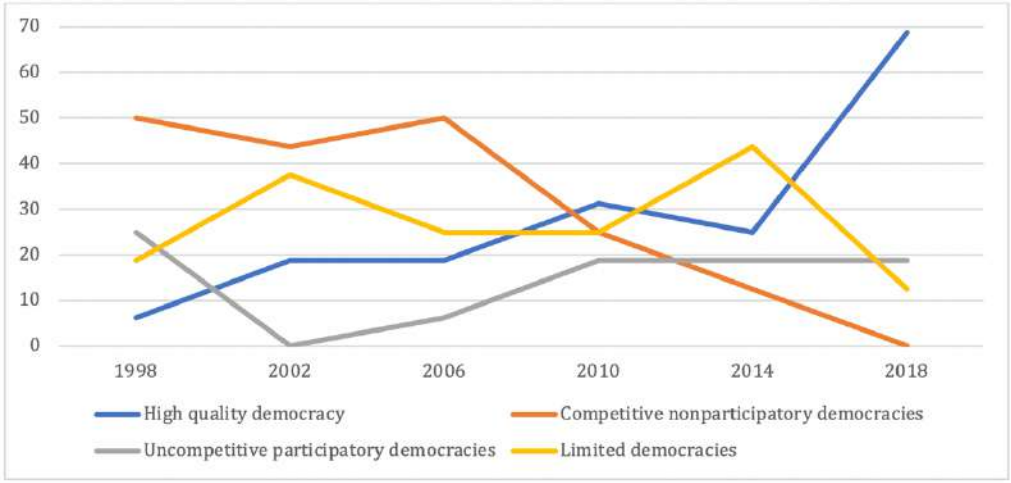
FIGURE 6: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 2000–2020




Source: VOLBY.CZ, authors' own calculations.

In contrast, some clearer trends are characteristic of the situation in Polish voivodeships (Figure 7). First, there has been a long-term decline of the proportion of regions with low turnout and balanced gains of government and opposition parties (competitive non-participatory democracies), from the most frequently occurring category in Poland's first three regional elections to zero occurrences in the most recent election. Second, there have consistently been relatively few occurrences of uncompetitive participatory democracies. In contrast, an almost constant long-term slight growth has been observed for the category of high-quality democracies, which became clearly dominant after the most recent election, whereas the category of limited democracies fails to exhibit any discernible trend and has remained at low levels.

FIGURE 7: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN POLAND REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2018




Source: PKW, authors' own calculations.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to offer a research design for evaluating quality of democracy at the regional level and use that research design in analysing a set of regional elections in the Czech Republic and Poland from the establishment of self-governing regions in each country to the most recent regional elections. As our conceptualization followed Dahl's procedural definition of democracy, we focused on two theoretical dimensions of democratization – participation and competition – and understood high-quality democracy as a type defined by a combination of high levels of both participation and competition. Furthermore, we used (in contrast to Dahl, but in accordance with the work of authors measuring quality of democracy) indicators of effective participation and competition to determine the different types of quality of democracy in specific regions and their development between elections.

Overall, our main conclusion is that in most cases, neither Czech nor Polish regions can be consistently, for most elections, classified in one of the four quality of democracy categories defined. Strong inter-electoral oscillation of the different types was observed. The only visible trend for Czech regions, then, is a rather low proportion of the categories of uncompetitive participatory democracies and limited democracies, while the shares of high-quality democracies and competitive non-participatory democracies tend to vary considerably between elections. In contrast, Poland exhibits a clear trend – a significant decrease of competitive non-participatory democracies together with a constant long-term slight growth of high-quality democracies, which became clearly dominant after the most recent election.

The substantial inter-electoral oscillation of quality of democracy types at the level of both countries as well as individual regions is primarily caused by a highly limited inter-electoral stability of competitiveness in the different regional assemblies (i.e., balance between the shares of seats held by government and opposition parties), in stark contrast to highly stable electoral participation. As a result, further research should pay detailed attention, above all, to the reasons behind the strong inter-electoral oscillation of competitiveness in individual regions of Czechia and Poland. Due to considerable shifts in the balance of power between government and opposition parties, regions that became high-level

democracies in one election shift to the category of uncompetitive participatory democracies in the next election (thus retaining their high voter turnout but experiencing a strong growth in the dominance of government parties) or even, in some cases, to the category of limited democracies.

The central question remains whether the main factors responsible for the strengthening/weakening role of opposition in regional assemblies can be traced back to the first-order arena. Indeed, as stated in the introduction, both Czech and Polish regional elections can be deemed second-order elections, which are dominated by nationwide parties and reflect changing trends in support for those parties as well as nationwide campaign issues (Gagatek and Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2020; Kouba and Lysek 2021). Then again, the strongly variable dynamics of competitiveness between elections, and between regions, suggest that local (regional) context also plays a role – and the question is whether that context is also shaped primarily by nationwide factors, i.e., varying territorial support for nationwide parties in some regions (see Kouba 2007; Zarycki 2015; Maškarinec 2017; Grabowski 2019). That would support the effect of so-called top-down vertical spill-over between the national and regional party systems (see Schakel and Romanova 2021). At the same time, a possible horizontal spill-over should be considered, i.e., a situation when the political development in one or more regional arenas impacts on the shape of party competition in other regional arenas. Finally, as political development in a regional arena may also affect (and be affected by) the region's socioeconomic conditions, a combination of political as well as socioeconomic or other contextual factors appears as the suitable starting point for examining not only the reasons behind changing competitiveness but also the quality of democracy types across regions.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE 1: QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN CZECH AND POLISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS, 1998–2020

| Region | High-quality democracy | Competitive non-participatory democracy | Uncompetitive participatory democracy | Limited democracy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | CZECH REPUBLIC | | | |
| Prague | 4 | 1 | 1 | - |
| Central Bohemian | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| South Bohemian | 3 | - | 1 | 2 |
| Plzeň | 3 | 3 | - | - |
| Karlovy Vary | - | 3 | - | 3 |
| Ústí nad Labem | - | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Liberec | 2 | - | 1 | 3 |
| Hradec Králové | 4 | 1 | - | 1 |
| Pardubice | 3 | - | 2 | 1 |
| Vysočina | 1 | - | 3 | 2 |
| South Moravian | 3 | 2 | 1 | - |
| Olomouc | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Zlín | 2 | - | 3 | 1 |
| Moravian-Silesian | - | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Total (%) | 33.3 | 26.2 | 19.0 | 21.4 |
| | POLAND | | | |
| Lower Silesia | 1 | 4 | - | 1 |
| Kuyavia-Pomerania | 1 | - | - | 5 |
| Lublin | 5 | 1 | - | |
| Lubusz | 1 | 3 | - | 2 |
| Łódź | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Lesser Poland | 2 | - | 2 | 2 |
| Masovia | 3 | 2 | 1 | - |
| Opole | - | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Subcarpathia | 4 | - | 2 | - |
| Podlasie | 3 | 3 | - | - |
| Pomerania | - | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Silesia | 1 | 4 | - | 1 |
| Holy Cross | 3 | - | 3 | - |
| Warmia-Masuria | - | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Greater Poland | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| West Pomerania | 1 | 2 | - | 3 |
| Total (%) | 29.2 | 30.2 | 15.6 | 25.0 |

Source: VOLBY.CZ, PKW, authors' own calculations.

# MERJENJE KAKOVOSTI SUBNACIONALNE DEMOKRACIJE: DEMOKRATIČNO TEKMOVANJE IN SODELOVANJE V ČEŠKIH IN POLJSKIH REGIJAH, 1998–2020

*Namen članka je prispevati k boljšemu razumevanju kakovosti subnacionalne (regionalne) demokracije v dveh postkomunističnih državah, in sicer Češki in Poljski. Po Dahlovi proceduralni definiciji demokracije se osredotočamo na dve teoretični konstitutivni razsežnosti demokracije – sodelovanje in tekmovanje – in razumemo visokokakovostno demokracijo kot tip, ki ga opredeljuje kombinacija visokih stopenj sodelovanja in tekmovanja. Z analizo vseh šestih regionalnih volitev od ustanovitve samoupravnih regij tako na Češkem kot na Poljskem smo ugotovili, da ne čeških ne poljskih regij ni mogoče dosledno razvrstiti med štiri opredeljene kategorije kakovosti demokracije, ki so visokokakovostna demokracija, nekonkurenčna sodelovalna demokracija, konkurenčno nesodelovalna demokracija in omejena demokracija. Precejšnje medvolilno nihanje kakovosti tipov demokracije na ravni obeh držav in posameznih regij je predvsem posledica močno omejene medvolilne stabilnosti konkurenčnosti v nasprotju z zelo stabilnimi stopnjami sodelovanja.*

**Ključne besede:** kakovost demokracije; subnacionalna demokracija; regionalne volitve; Češka; Poljska.

# LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES – IN THE LIGHT OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**István HOFFMAN**[1]

*The Visegrád countries have similar administrative systems, therefore the major characteristics of their development policies are similar, but several differences can be observed. These similarities and differences are analysed by this paper. Poland has a regionalized system and a partially merged 1st tier municipal model. Therefore, local development has a significant role. Hungarian, Czech and Slovakian local development policies are limited by the fragmented spatial and municipal systems, however the Slovakian regions have a strong development characteristic. Centralization tendencies can be observed but their intensities are different. The Hungarian model is significantly impacted by the strong centralization of the last ten years. Similar structures evolved among the local development policies of the 1st tier municipalities: the detailed development policies can be observed among the larger, mainly urban municipalities, the local development policies of the smaller, rural municipalities are based on the personal cooperation and neighbourhood activities. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the local development policies, their focus has been transformed partially, but the structure of the local policies did not change significantly, the differentiated structure remained untouched.*

**Key words:** local development; local policies; municipal systems; centralization; Visegrád countries.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The significance of the development policies has increased in the last decades. They have been strengthened by globalization and by enhancing global

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competition (Pike et al. 2017). The relationship between the different tiers of development policies is a complex phenomenon which has transformed in the last decades. Different approaches on interpretation of development policies have evolved and these approaches are linked to the different models of multilevel governance. It is emphasized by Hooghe and Marks, that multilevel governance can be interpreted as a by-product of the administrative transformation of the last decades, because the rise of supranational government (especially in the European continent but even in Northern America) and the increasing role of the subnational units: regional bodies mainly, but partly the 1st tier municipalities as well (Hooghe and Marks 2001). Local and regional development have different interpretations. First, there is a narrow interpretation based on the approach that only the development policies and initiatives working from *within* the region can be interpreted as local and regional. This narrow interpretation is the concept of the so-called *regional development governance.* The broad interpretation is based on the approach that the concept of local and regional development covers all initiatives which have impact and effect on a given local and regional unit. Therefore, even those programs are interpreted as regional development which tackle development problems from *outside* the region. In Europe, so-called external development aid or official development assistance is significantly co-funded by the European Union, especially in the new Member States (Bruszt and Palestini 2016). As the Visegrád Countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) belong to the new Member States and the role of the external, especially EU co-funded aids have significant role in the national, regional and local development policies (Nyikos and Kondor 2019), the approach of this paper is based on the *broad approach* of local development policies. Even though, analysis will focus on the locally decided development issues and on the opportunities for local governments in the field of development policies.

## 2 METHODS

This paper is based on the *institutional approach*; mainly, therefore the analysis focuses on the regulation and the institutional framework primarily. The effect of legal regulation on the local development issues and the on the local financing are included in this institutional approach. In some part even the soft law documents (mainly policy papers, plans etc.) are examined.

Local financing is an important element of the research because the financial resources are required for the realization of the local development projects. Although, there is a possibility to build local development policies on the personal cooperation of the members of – a mainly smaller – community only, the majority of the local development projects are based on financial support (Niezgoda and Czernek, 2008). Therefore, the major economic data on development resources and on municipal revenues and expenses will be analysed. The data from the national and European official statistics, especially the national statistics offices and mainly from the Eurostat - especially the COFOG database and the data on national accounts - were used a source for the study. The data on the expenditures and frameworks of the European Structural and Investment Funds (hereinafter: ESIF) are based on the open database of the European Commission.[2]

[2] The database can be downloaded at https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/countries.

Several findings are based on an empirical analysis of Polish and Hungarian municipalities derived from semi structured interviews in the Capital Municipality of Budapest (Hungary) and Town Municipality of Lublin (Poland). The interviews were conducted in October 2020, the first results of the interviews were published in the article of Hoffman and Balázs (Hoffman and Balázs 2022).

## 3 FRAMEWORK OF THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

### 3.1 Institutional models of local development policies in Europe

The institutional framework of the local development policies is determined by various factors, and different models can be distinguished. The interpretations are mainly based on the approaches to public administration. The local development policies have multi-dimensional nature because they are related to the vertical coordination of the administrative systems, especially the share of powers and duties between the different governance levels (Piattoni 2010). The vertical coordination between the different tiers of development policies is important, the cooperation with the private sector (including the NGOs) is a significant issue, as well (Danson et al. 2000; Gherhes 2020).

*Centralized, decentralized* and *federal* models are distinguished as a vertical classification of the regional development models (Danson et al. 2000). The centralized model is based on the determinative role of the *central government* and its agencies. However, local and regional governments have significant competences; most of the policy-making responsibilities – especially the preparation and approval of the major plans and the management of the allocation of the development funds – are centralized (Hoffman 2018). The decentralized model of regional development is based on the determinative role of regional governments. Therefore, this model is closely related to *regionalisation* (Loughlin et al. 2011). *Federal states* could be interpreted as an independent regime of regional development. The member states of the federation – which have statehood – have wide development responsibilities. Federal governments have limited responsibilities in development and planning issues (Diller et al. 2019).

In Europe local governments manage the so-called local public issues. First, the *local development as a municipal task* should be reviewed. In common law systems, the *monist model* of municipal tasks has evolved. Originally the traditional Anglo-Saxon municipal systems were based on the *ultra vires* principle, these tasks were interpreted as municipal tasks defined or recognized by the legislation. There was a distinction between obligatory and voluntary municipal tasks. (Arden et al. 2008). However, the regulation transformed in these countries, and the general powers of the municipalities were recognized by the majority, the model has not changed (Goldsmith and Page 2010). The traditional continental local governance was based on the general powers of the municipalities traditionally. However, the scope and the constitutional protection of the general powers are different, but this basis resulted in the distinction between municipal tasks and transferred state (central government) tasks, and among municipal tasks voluntary and obligatory tasks can be distinguished (Nagy et al. 2019). According to the regional development regime of the given country, the development issues belong to obligatory municipal tasks

mainly. In the states following the centralized development model the municipalities have additional obligatory tasks, their development competencies belong to the voluntary municipal tasks usually (Hoffman 2018).

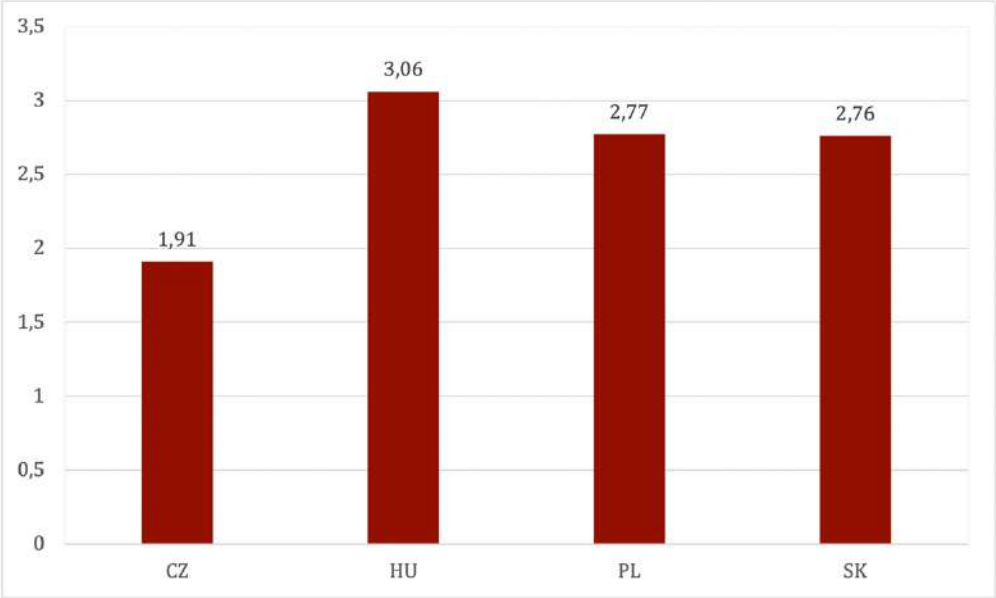
### 3.2 Municipal systems and development issues in the V4 countries

The Visegrád Countries (V4) – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – have common social, historical and economic roots. There are differences, for example, Poland is larger than the other three countries, after the fall of Communism, similar municipal systems evolved. During the Democratic Transition decentralized municipal systems were established but several differences occurred as well. Based on traditions and on the larger territory and on the Europeanization of public administration, a regional reform was passed in Poland in 1998. A three-tier system was introduced, and the development issues became obligatory tasks of the 3rd tier of local governments, the regional units, the so-called voivodeships *(województwo)*. However, the 1st municipalities, the communes *(gmina)* have important competencies in basic public services, the public service performance is strongly based on the two regional tiers, on the districts *(powiat)* (and towns with district status) and on the voivodeships (Karpiuk and Kostrubiec 2017). Like the Polish regionalization reforms, the Slovakian administrative system was reformed between 1996 and 2005. A slight regionalization was passed, and a two-tier system (communes – villages and towns – and regions) was introduced. The fragmentation of the 1st tier remained, but the new, eight regions *(kraj)* received important regional planning and development obligatory tasks. These regions are smaller – related to the EU classification NUTS-3 – regional units, therefore, those tasks which should be performed at NUTS-2 level belong to the competencies of the central government. Because of the very fragmented 1st tier municipal system, the Slovakian system can be interpreted as a region-centred model (Klimovský and Nemec 2021). Czechia and Hungary have a strongly fragmented communal system. The Czech system is based on the public service provision of the 14 Czech regions *(kraj)* which are NUTS-3 units and on the eminent role of the town municipalities, which have responsibilities for the service provision of their surroundings. (Radvan et al. 2021). Therefore, eight regional development regions were established in Czechia which have regional development councils. These councils are based on the cooperation of the municipal and central government, and they can be interpreted as special, atypical central government bodies. The formal autonomy of the twenty Hungarian county governments *(megye)* remained untouched but after the reforms of 2011/12 the counties lost their public service provision roles. Instead, they received several additional development tasks, especially participation in the regional planning activities of the central government agencies. Hungary has a special situation among the V4 countries. The provision of the human public services was significantly nationalized after 2011 (Hoffman et al. 2016). In Czechia the regional development tasks are primarily managed by the regional development agencies of the central government. Hungary has a more centralized model; the regional development tasks are mainly centrally managed by the regional (county) directorates of the Hungarian State Treasury (Hoffman 2018a). It should be emphasized that despite the regionalized Slovakian and Polish system, the regional development systems of these countries are strongly centralized, the municipal development plays a supplementary role in the development policies only (Lux 2018).

Similarly, it should be emphasized that the role of the ESIF is very significant in these countries. During the 2014-2020 EU budgeting cycle the V4 countries

received significant EU funding: according to the Eurostat data on national accounts, the sum of received ESIF fundings were 1.91-3.06% of their GDPs (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: YEARLY ESIF FUNDS FROM EU (2014-2020) IN THE SHARE OF THE AVERAGE OF 2014-2020 GDP (CURRENT MARKET PRICES) (%)[3]



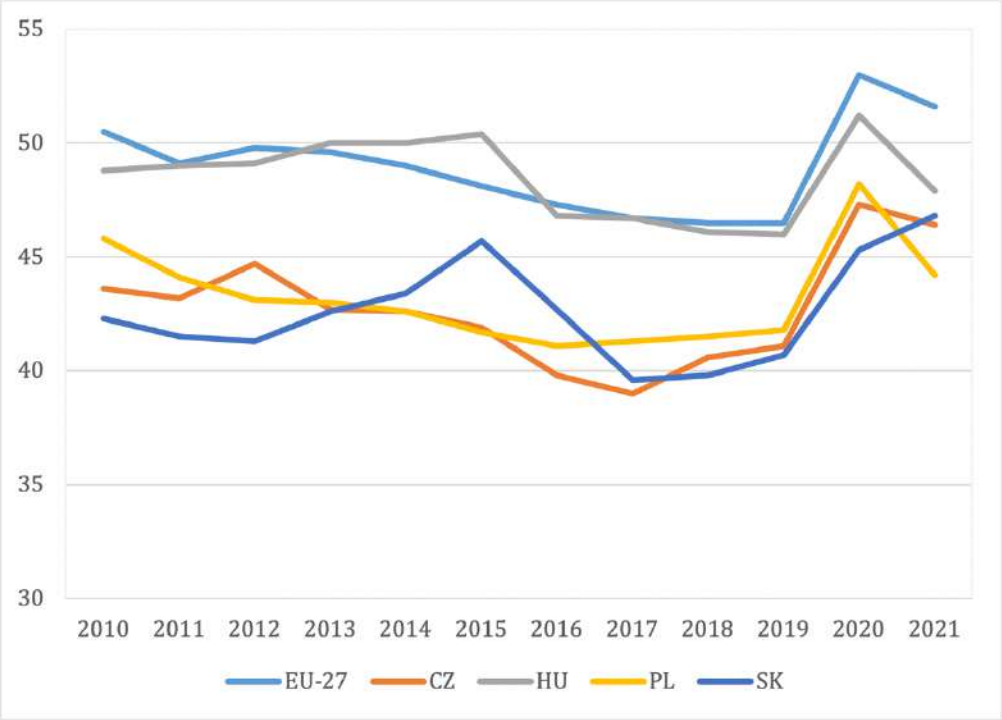

Therefore, the role of the EU policies, especially the EU cohesion policy have significant impact on the local development policies of the V4 countries as well. This high share of EU funded development activities combined with the centralized national management of the ESI Funds show that the central governments and their agencies have an outstanding impact on these policies.

Another important issue of the development policies is the role of the public sector in the national economy. There are different approaches of government spending among modern economies. The continental pattern is followed by these countries (Stiglitz 2020) but there are several differences. First of all, during the EU Accession, especially due to the actions regarding the planned accessions to the Eurozone, different taxation and government spending reforms were passed. However, it is common that the general government expenditures were between 40 and 50 percent of the GDP after the economic crisis of 2008/2009 (the highest was in Hungary and the lowest was in Slovakia). The quite significant differences were related to the above-mentioned reforms or the lack or limited impact of these reforms. Similarly, during the 2010s the economic growth was not followed by the increase of the government spending of these countries: the share of the general government expenditure decreased during the last decade (Fisher 2015). The economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions related to the pandemic had a significant impact on these countries. A 'COVID-peak' can be observed: the government revenues declined because of the economic restrictions but the expenditures increased because of the health and social issues related to the treatment of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the share of the government expenditures increased significantly in 2020. Because of these special circumstances, the year 2020 could be interpreted as an 'excited state'. In 2021 the mass vaccination started and after the spring

[3] Based on the data of the Eurostat national accounts 2014–2020 and on the https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/countries.

wave (the 3rd wave) of COVID-19 the restrictions became gentler and the economic growth in Europe – and in the Visegrád Countries – increased. After the 'excited state' of 2020, 2021 can be considered as a 'relaxation'. Slovakia was an exception: it was hit strongly by the 3rd wave of COVID, therefore, the government expenditures remained relatively high in 2021. Therefore, the share of the government expenditures has been increased. The situation in Hungary was partly similar: the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 was the most serious (Grędzisnka et al. 2022), therefore, the 'relaxation' of the COVID-19 'peak' of government expenditure was not as radical as in Poland and in Czechia (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 2: GENERAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES (V4 AND EU-27, IN THE SHARE OF GDP) 2010–2021




Source: Eurostat.

## 4 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### 4.1Common patterns

The local development systems of the Visegrád countries have several common patterns. First of all, the municipal systems are similar: they are based on the continental approach of local governance (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019). However, the service provision roles are different in these countries, because of the reforms of the 2010s, centralization tendencies can be observed. The V4 countries had a similar service provision pattern after the Democratic Transition. The reorganized local government bodies were mainly responsible for the performance of the human public services and the local public utilities. This common pattern has been transformed, especially after the economic crisis of 2008/2009 (Silva 2020). The centralization of the public services and regional development has been the most radical in Hungary (Gárdos-Orosz 2021): the provision of public education institutes (except the kindergartens), specialized

(residential) social care and child protection services, specialized outpatient care and hospitals and several cultural services have been nationalized (Szente 2013). The centralization of the public service provision is a tendency in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia, but it is based on gentler reforms, which are especially linked to the transformation of the municipal finances and to the strengthening of the legal supervision of the central government agencies (Radvan 2020; Kostrubiec 2021; Janas and Janošková 2022).

However, there are differences in spatial structure of these countries, especially Poland can be considered as an exception, but it should be emphasized that the Czech, the Hungarian and the Slovakian municipal systems are strongly fragmented. In Poland a concentration passed, but the number of the first-tier municipalities is relatively high and even small communities are defined as independent municipal units. Therefore, different *local development models* can be distinguished. As it has been mentioned, the local development tasks belong mainly to the competences of the regional (2nd or in Poland 3rd tier) municipalities. Because of the general powers municipal system, the municipalities could have so-called facultative tasks: the municipalities can perform those local public affairs which do not belong to the competences of the central government and its agencies. It is emphasized that development issues are important for local leaders (Kukovič 2017). The performance of the local development issues as facultative tasks is an eminent element of the local development policies. Performance of the facultative tasks has different patterns in different municipalities. Because of the fragmented municipal system of the Visegrád countries and the relatively limited resources of most of the first-tier local governments, mainly *urban municipalities* have detailed and well elaborated local development regimes. There are differences on the interpretation of the urban municipalities of the Visegrád countries, but it could be emphasized that in these countries the municipalities with more than 100 000 inhabitants can interpreted as large communities. These municipalities have significant human and financial resources, the local revenues are higher in these units (Schmidt 2021). A common pattern of these urban development policies is the new focus which evolved in the last decade: the development of smart cities. The smart city projects in Central and Eastern Europe are mainly focusing on public utilities, on public transport and on development of the local economy. As it will be analysed later, there are differences, especially in the field of human public services (Ibănescu et al. 2020; Haček 2020). The medium-sized municipalities – which are mainly town municipalities in these countries – have similar local development strategies, however, these strategies have limited financial resources, and these tasks mainly focus on the development of the local small and medium enterprises and on local community development issues. It should be emphasized, that those smaller municipalities which can be interpreted as tourism destinations, have well-organized and elaborated development policies, which focus on the development of the 'local brand'. Small municipalities – especially in rural areas – even have local development policies, but they focus on involvement of the local human capacities and on personal cooperation of local stakeholders and small communities (Hoffman and Fazekas 2019). This pattern can be observed by the examination of other facultative tasks, for example cross-border cooperation: the activities of the smaller municipalities focus on the personal cooperation and personal capacities not on financial resources (Kukovič and Haček 2018).

## 4.2 … and different ways

Although the municipal system of the Visegrád countries can be interpreted similarly, there are several differences. First, as it was mentioned above, *Poland* is the largest Visegrád country, it is larger and have more inhabitants than Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia altogether. The Polish system has its specialties: firstly, the regional municipalities, the voivodeships *(województwo)* have important regional development tasks, however the management of the ESIF is relatively centralized in Poland. Secondly, the first-tier municipalities of Poland are concentrated; they have fewer first-tier municipalities than Slovakia, which has a far smaller population. The regions have important competences in the field of the provision of human public services, the regions are the general maintainer of hospitals, specialized social care institutions and several public education institutions. Similarly, the 2nd tier municipalities, the districts *(powiat)* and the cities with district rights *(miasto na prawach powiatu* – which can be interpreted as urban municipalities) have even important service provision tasks. The development of human public services is more important in Poland. Although the human public services are significant tasks of the urban municipalities, only the minority of the Polish smart city programs focusing on these services: especially the education and partly the social care (only in Poznań) have been involved in these projects (Masik et al. 2020). The villages were merged into concentrated municipal units, into communities *(gmina).* However, the villages *(sołectwo)* could not be interpreted as independent municipalities, they have elements of self-governance: therefore, they can be distinguished as sub-municipal units. From 2010 – based on the Act on Village Found *(Ustawa o Funduszu Sołeckim)* the (merged) communities, as first-tier municipalities are encouraged to establish village funds and support their sub-municipal units. The local development aid was supported by the central budget. Although the immediate reaction to this act was moderate, in 2015 almost two-third of the rural municipalities had introduced this system (Swianiewicz 2018).

In *Slovakia* the regions *(kraj)* have several obligatory (statutory) tasks in the field of development policies (Janas and Janošková 2022). Because of the fragmented 1st tier municipal system – which is based on the fragmented spatial structure and on the principle of 'one settlement – one municipality' – the 1st tier development policies are mainly focusing on enhancing the cooperation of the inhabitants. There are of course exceptions: the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava and its agglomeration is defined as a region *(kraj)*, therefore, it has significant development responsibilities. The larger municipalities have similarly detailed development strategies, which are mainly focusing on the development of the local economy. Because of the wide powers of the regions, especially in the field of human public services, the development of these services is an important issue, as well (Klimovský and Nemec 2021).

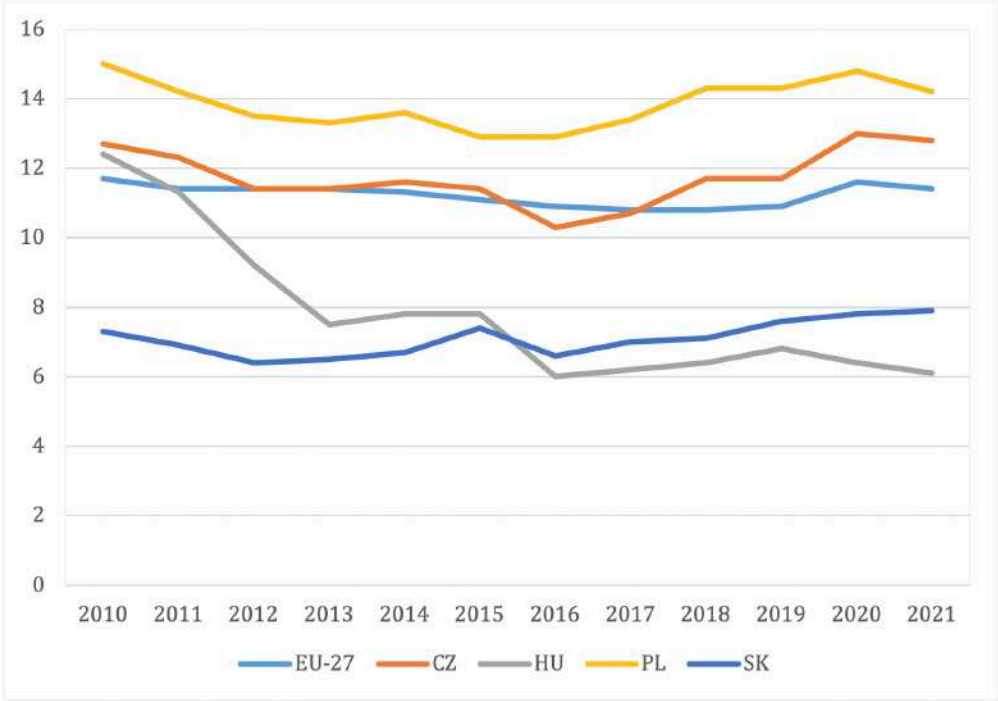
*Czechia* has a similarly fragmented municipal system, however the regions *(kraj)* have less development competencies, they are important public service providers. The specialty of the Czech system, that the Czech public administration can be considered as a *town-centered system.* Because of the fragmented 1st tier municipal systems, the significant share of the municipal services is performed by the town municipalities, which provide these tasks for their surroundings, as well (Radvan et al. 2021).

The *Hungarian* local development system was transformed radically during the last decade. As it was mentioned earlier, the counties lost their service provision tasks, and their development tasks are very limited, they have only supporting competences. The regional development has been strongly centralized, the management tasks belong to the responsibilities of the central government and its agencies. The 1st tier municipal system is fragmented, like in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the tasks of these municipalities have been strongly centralized, and several tasks related to the maintenance of human public service providers and even public utilities were nationalized or at least concentrated. However, the municipalities were not merged, administration of the small – rural – municipalities are concentrated by the establishment of joint municipal offices (Hoffman et al. 2016). The municipal revenues were partly concentrated after 2010. Therefore, the opportunities to establish local development policies are very limited in Hungary. If they establish these policies then they depend on the central government actions strongly, because their financial resources are mainly provided by the central government and its agencies, primarily from funds which are co-funded by the ESI Funds (Hoffman 2018a; Pálné Kovács 2019).

### 4.3 The impact of the COVID-19 on local development policies

First, it should be emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-economic crisis, which was caused partly by the epidemic restrictions, are a situation that is clearly pointing in the direction of strengthening the centralization trends. In crisis situations, centralization steps and these administrative reforms traditionally took precedence over decentralization (Kostrubiec 2021). However, the centralization trend was dominant during the legislation of the last year, different tendencies can be observed. Municipalities can be the 'trash cans' of public administration: former central government competencies are decentralized because their performance could be unpopular (Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The local development policies of the Visegrád countries were influenced by this duality. First, the *municipal revenues* have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Because these revenues depend on the economic output, these revenues were decreased by the recession caused by the pandemic. Secondly, the *municipal expenditures* increased during the pandemic. The health care expenditures increased, and similarly the restrictions, the lockdowns caused even social impacts, which should be treated by the social care services. Municipalities had a limited framework for local development policies and local development policies focused on the treatment of the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the general government expenditures, the share of the local government expenditures in the national economies increased in 2020, during the 1st and 2nd wave of COVID-19, a 'pandemic peak' can be seen in the statistics. However, the year 2021 was mainly a 'relaxation' after the excited state of 2020: this relaxation can be observed in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia. Hungary and Slovakia could be interpreted as exceptions: Hungary was an exception because of the municipal financial reform (which will be analysed later) a 'COVID-peak' cannot be observed and the mass testing during the 2nd and 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted higher municipal expenditures in Slovakia. In Hungary the 'COVID-peak' was very slight and in Slovakia no peak in municipal spendings can be observed (see Figure 3).

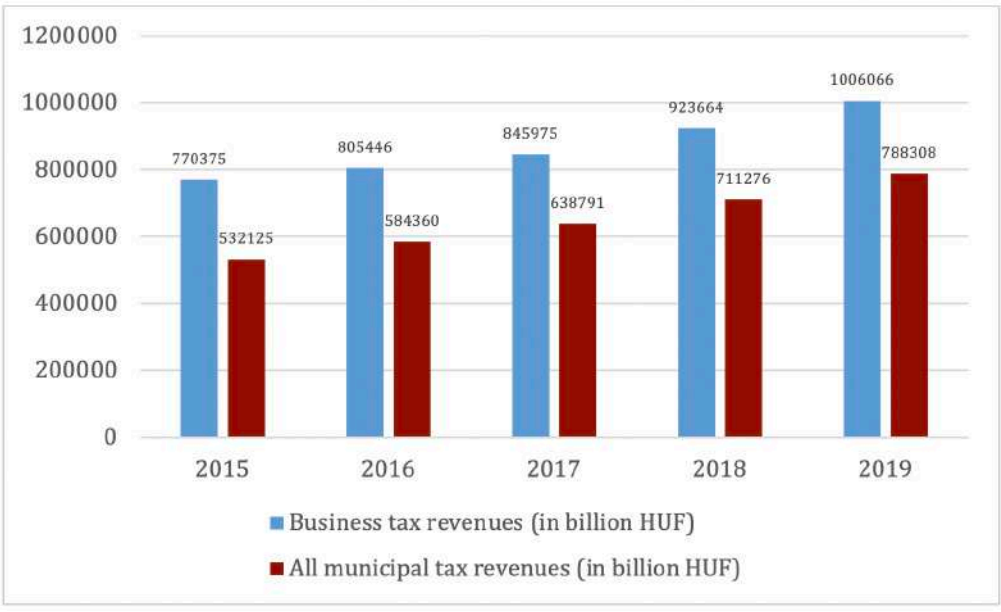
FIGURE 3: LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES (V4 AND EU-27 IN THE SHARE OF GDP, 2010–2021)




Source: Eurostat.

Another common pattern was that the central government did not offer significant help and aid for the local government activities (Nemec and Špaček 2021). The activities of the Hungarian government were the most radical. Major element of the economic restart program was the radical decrease of the most important local tax, the local business tax (see Figure 3). The maximum rate of this tax for enterprises which have less than 4 billion HUF (around 10 million EUR) yearly income was decreased to one percent (from the former two percent). Thus, the maximum rate of tax was halved for most of the taxpayers.

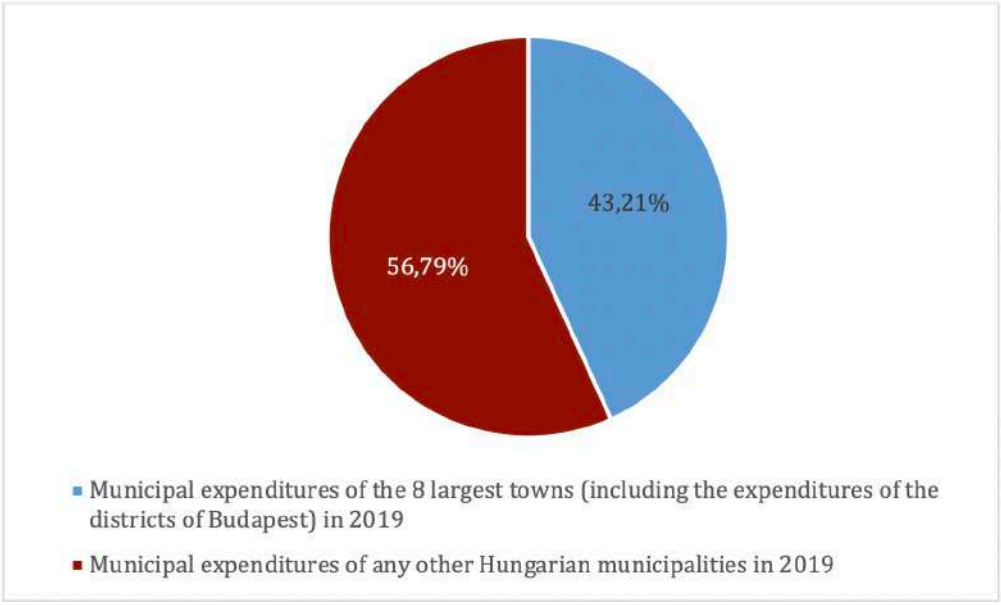
FIGURE 4: MUNICIPAL TAXATION AND ROLE OF THE LOCAL BUSINESS TAX




Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, www.ksh.hu.

This reform impacted mainly the larger municipalities: this tax is strongly concentrated, and this is the main (own) revenue of the urban municipalities (Siket 2021). Urban municipalities have a special political situation in Hungary: the dominance of the FIDESZ among these municipalities are slighter: 10 towns with county rights (out of 25) are led by the opposition mayors and coalitions. 4 towns which have more than 100 000 inhabitants are led by the opposition (out of seven, not including the capital Budapest). The capital, Budapest, which has about 1.7 million inhabitants (about 17-18 percent of the whole Hungarian population) is opposition-lead as well (the mayor of the capital city and 14 district mayors out of 23 belong to the opposition coalition). The municipal expenditures of the 8 largest municipalities cover 43,21% of the whole Hungarian municipal expenditures (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 5: SHARE OF THE MUNICIPAL EXPENDITURES OF THE LARGEST HUNGARIAN MUNICIPALITIES




Source: Eurostat and on the municipal decrees of annual financial accounts.

Similarly, it was common during the time of pandemic that the municipalities tried to introduce special 'COVID-policies' in the Visegrád countries. As I have mentioned above, these COVID-policies were not supported by the central government. However, several 'unpopular' measures – especially stricter regulations on lockdown, shop and market opening times and on mandatory face mask requirements – were 'decentralized' by the central governments of the Visegrád countries. Municipal bodies could make decisions and thus, these unpopular decisions became 'outsourced' to the municipalities, as the above mentioned 'trash cans' of public administrations (Plaček et al. 2020; Czuryk 2021; Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The 'COVID-policies' focused mainly on public service issues: for example, in Slovakia – and partly in Hungary – the mass testing during the first two waves of the COVID were significantly funded by the municipalities (Plaček et al. 2020; Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The 'COVID-policies' of the smaller municipalities have focused on care (especially social care) issues, and on those issues which could be managed by neighbourhood cooperation. Those smaller municipalities which can be considered as tourist destinations, could be interpreted as an exception, because they introduced economic development programs to mitigate the effects of epidemic restrictions (Plaček et al. 2020; Hoffman 2022).

The urban municipalities of the Visegrád countries had different patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the more significant resources, they introduced several development measures. Mainly these development policies focused on the aid for small and medium enterprises. In Poland the larger municipalities introduced tax discounts and they applied reduced prices for renting municipal lands and commercial premises. Several new, special social benefits were introduced mainly by the Polish towns, especially the fees of public services (public transport, kindergartens, schools etc.) were reduced (Kańdula and Przybylska 2021). Local tax reductions and aid for small and medium enterprises were introduced by the Czech and Slovakian larger municipalities, as well. As it was mentioned earlier, in Slovakia most of the municipalities organized mass testing on COVID-19 (Plaček et al. 2020). The Hungarian larger municipalities have a special situation: the similar development issues can be observed, as in Slovakia, but the development policies focused more on the social benefits. During the first wave of the COVID-19 unemployment became quite high in Hungary. After the social benefit reforms of 2011/12, Hungarian unemployment benefit has been provided only for a maximum 90 days which is the shortest period among the Visegrád countries and one of the shortest provision periods in the EU (Hungler 2022). Therefore, special unemployment benefits as municipal social benefits were introduced by the larger Hungarian municipalities in 2020. It should be emphasized that these benefits were introduced by those municipalities which have been led by the opposition parties, and these benefits could be interpreted as 'alternative social policy measures' by which the opposite offered a different social policy approach. As it was mentioned, during 2020 the major municipal own revenues of the Hungarian larger municipalities, the local business tax was significantly reduced by the central government: the development framework of the Hungarian (larger) municipalities became more limited (Hoffman and Balázs 2022; Siket 2021).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The local development policies depend on the municipal systems, the economic environment and on the role of the central government. The Visegrád countries have similar administrative systems, therefore the major characteristics of their development policies are similar. As new Member States of the EU and recipient of ESI Funds, they have a relatively centralized development system. However, the major elements are similar, and several differences can be observed. Poland as the largest Visegrád country has a relatively decentralized model which is based on the regionalization reforms. Czech, Hungarian and Slovakian municipal development systems are more fragmented, and have less competences. The administrative system of Hungary has been radically transformed during the last decade, it was strongly centralized, therefore, the possibilities of municipal development are more limited. Development of human public services is an important local issue, but in Hungary the central public service development policies are preferred by the nationalized public service provision system.

Similar patterns can be observed among the 1st tier municipalities: the detailed development policies can be observed among the larger, mainly urban municipalities, the local development policies of the smaller, rural municipalities are based on the personal cooperation and neighbourhood activities. The tourist destinations can be interpreted as exceptions: they have detailed development strategies based on the improvement of the local brand.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the increase of the municipal spending and in 2020 the decrease of the municipal revenues. The development strategies of the municipalities during the COVID-19 were not supported significantly by the central governments, in Hungary they were even limited by the radical reduction of the most important local taxes. The structure of the local development policies were not transformed by the pandemic and their structure remained the same: the rural municipalities focused on personal cooperation and the larger municipalities introduced special economic aids and social benefits.

It seemed that the economic crisis caused by the epidemic restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic could be terminated in 2022, but the Russian aggression against Ukraine caused another economic difficulty in these countries and resulted in a new issue which should be considered during the planning of the new development policies: the refugee crisis. Because Poland, Slovakia and Hungary are neighbouring countries of Ukraine and the Czech Republic is close as well, these countries would face a great number of Ukrainian refugees. This issue should be considered among local development policies, as well. However, the first impacts of the Russian-Ukrainian war can be seen, the detailed analysis of its impact on the local development policies could be made later.

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# POLITIKE LOKALNEGA RAZVOJA V DRŽAVAH V4 – V LUČI VPLIVA PANDEMIJE COVID-19

*Višegrajske države imajo podobne upravne sisteme, zato so glavne značilnosti njihovih razvojnih politik podobne, kljub temu pa je opaziti več razlik. Omenjene podobnosti in razlike so analizirane v tem prispevku. Poljska ima sistem regij in delno združen občinski model prve stopnje, zato ima lokalni razvoj pomembno vlogo. Lokalne razvojne politike Madžarske, Češke in Slovaške omejujejo razdrobljeni prostorski in občinski sistemi, vendar imajo slovaške regije močno razvojno značilnost. Opaziti je mogoče centralizacijske težnje, vendar so njihove intenzivnosti različne. Na madžarski model na primer precej vpliva močna centralizacija v zadnjih desetih letih. Podobne strukture so se razvile med lokalnimi razvojnimi politikami občin prve stopnje: podrobne razvojne politike je mogoče opaziti med večjimi, predvsem mestnimi občinami; lokalne razvojne politike manjših, podeželskih občin pa temeljijo na osebnem sodelovanju in sosedskih dejavnostih. Pandemija COVID-19 je vplivala na lokalne razvojne politike - njihov fokus se je delno preoblikoval, diferencirana struktura lokalnih politik pa se ni bistveno spremenila, ampak je ostala nedotaknjena.*

**Ključne besede:** lokalni razvoj; lokalne politike; občinski sistemi; centralizacija; Višegrajske države.

# SLOVENIAN LOCAL ELECTIONS FROM 1994 TO 2022: DOMINANCE OF NON-PARTISAN LISTS AND MAYORS

**Miro HAČEK**[1]

*Elections to representative bodies are the basic tool for exercising power in democratic countries and the most recognizable external sign of democracy. Much ink has already been spilled about the institute of local elections and many scientific contributions have been written, which also applies to Slovenian local elections. In the analysis of the previous eight local elections, which have been held since 1994, the conclusion that local elections are somewhat underestimated and neglected compared to parliamentary elections is emphasized, as political parties have had lot less success at the local levels of authority. At the same time, it remains relatively unnoticed that local elections have a similar role and meaning to parliamentary elections, except that they are held on a significantly smaller territory, in significantly smaller communities and have a different substantive sign. However, local elections represent the most important influence of the inhabitants of the local community on the operation of the local self-government, therefore they represent the fundamental element of local democracy. In this article, we analyse the essential characteristics of the eight local elections in independent Slovenia so far, with an emphasis on the most recent elections, which took place in late November 2022.*

**Key words:** elections; local government; non-partisanship; political parties; Slovenia.

## 1 THE VIBRANCY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY[2]

There is a growing tendency to strengthen local democracy whereby citizens or residents are placed at the centre of all the activities of local communities. It is a question of citizens' quality of life, and the responsiveness of public services to

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their needs and interests (Prebilič and Kukovič 2021, 539). Local democracy is therefore a mix of direct decision-making by citizens and representative democracy. With *indirect local democracy*, the decision-making process takes place through bodies elected in local elections. Another participatory form is *direct local democracy.* In addition to these traditional forms of local democracy, there are also newer, more modern forms of local democracy and political participation. The traditional forms of local democracy and participation are in fact the prerequisites and the basis for the more modern forms. In the Slovenian local government system, municipality residents exercise indirect local democracy by electing mayors, municipal councillors, and members of the councils of municipal subdivisions.

The assumption of some political parties that the increasing number of electoral units (municipalities) will help them obtain a larger share of votes was not unrealistic. However, from one local election to the next, the significance of this assumption has steadily declined, because non-party candidates have come to the forefront. Before analysing the election results it should be noted that the increase in the number of municipalities from 62 before 1994 to the current 212 is, above all, the result of an increasing number of small municipalities with a relatively small number of voters and in which one vote has a significantly greater impact than in large municipalities. Moreover, a different (majority) voting system has been established in these municipalities, where people and candidates are elected first and foremost, and where political parties, *a priori*, do not have much influence. Therefore, since the first local elections after the introduction of local government in 1994, analysts of local elections have been asking themselves whether a victory in a host of small municipalities can outweigh an electoral victory in a single city municipality with more voters than thirty of the smallest municipalities combined. Table 3 shows voter turnout in all local elections to date.

Voter turnout at local elections in the early period after the re-establishment of a local government (1994 to 2002) was higher than in the latter period (2006 to 2022), although, at the 2002 local elections, it should be noted that they were held simultaneously to the presidential elections, which undoubtedly had a positive effect on the higher turnout. The turnout at local elections in the last decade has consolidated at about fifty percent with a negative bottom in 2014, an unexpected six percent turnout increase at the local elections in 2018[3] (Haček 2019) and slight drop below 50 percent margin again in 2022. Turnout has traditionally been higher in smaller municipalities; for comparison, at the local elections in 2018, the voter turnout was 67,6 percent in municipalities under a thousand inhabitants and only 46,8 percent in municipalities over twenty-thousand inhabitants. When electoral (non-)participation is analysed, an interesting question regarding the reasons for non-participation arises. Electoral participation research tends not to examine people who do not participate in elections, abstainers, or apathetic people, i.e., those who do not participate in elections at all. This group exacerbates the problem of social exclusion. Apathetic people who do not participate in the political (electoral) life are excluded from the usual ways used by citizens to collectively form their society. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) have established that non-participation is the result of the following reasons: people do not participate, because they cannot (a lack

[3] As comparison we add voter turnout at parliamentary elections in the period of 1992–2018: 85,6 percent (1992); 73,7 percent (1996); 70,1 percent (2000); 60,6 percent (2004); 63,1 percent (2008); 65,6 percent (2011); 51,7 percent (2014) (Haček, Kukovič and Brezovšek 2017, 144); 52,6 percent (2018) and 71,0 percent (2022) (State Electoral Commission 2022).

of time), do not want to (disappointed in politics) or are isolated from social networks that could help them get involved in the political situation.

TABLE 1: VOTER TURNOUT AT LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE PERIOD FROM 1994 TO 2022 (IN PERCENT)

| Year of local elections | Voter turnout (first round of local elections) |
|---|---|
| 1994 | 62,7 |
| 1998 | 58,3 |
| 2002 | 72,1 |
| 2006 | 58,2 |
| 2010 | 51,0 |
| 2014 | 45,2 |
| 2018 | 51,2 |
| 2022 | 47,6 |

Source: Data of the State Electoral Commission (Haček 2019); data for local elections 2018 (Kukovič and Haček 2019) and 2022 (State Electoral Commission 2022).

## 2 TRADITIONS OF (NON-)PARTISANSHIP IN SLOVENIA

Political parties tend to form due to social, cultural, and other inequalities (Bibič 1992) and play at least a dual role as organizations. On the one hand, they have a social role and are social actors since they develop social ties with society. In this manner, they interconnect voters and sympathizers, include citizens in the political system via their mobilization function, and attempt to represent the interests of society in institutions where policies and other decisions are formed. On the other hand, political parties are institutional actors, meaning that they perform tasks pertaining to governmental and parliamentarian actors, especially in the sense of regulating colliding social interests, forming political institutions, and organizing governmental and parliamentarian life (Van Biezen 1998).

Political parties first appeared in Slovenian territory in the second half of the 19th century and were mainly representatives of two large blocks (clerical and liberal) and one minor (socialist). Political parties disappeared prior to World War II and were even prohibited after the war (Lukšič 2001, 37). One can only identify two periods in Slovenian history during which partisanship flourished: the early 1920s and the early 1990s (Lukšič 1994, 23). Instead of witnessing the rise of partisanship, Slovenian politics were harshly criticized by partisanship, which developed new forms of political and social organizations instead of parties. An anti-party trend is – on the other hand – one of the more recent phenomena in contemporary democracies around the world (Bale and Roberts 2002, 1).

In different periods of the 20th century in Slovenia, the Catholic side offered a corporatist state featuring the strong role of the Church, while the socialist side offered a corporatist state with the stressed role of a single class (Zver 1990, 154). The tradition of the non-partisan organization was first enhanced by *Ljudska fronta* – the People's Front – and even more so by *Osvobodilna fronta* – the Liberation Front. However, the Catholic side opposed the Liberation Front and, in so doing, opted against the non-partisanship type of organization, and strived towards the old-party structure in which it had played a hegemonic role. Thus, during the war, a battle for the type of post-war political organization to be put in place was also being fought: a battle between partisanship and non-partisanship. The non-partisanship won. The People's Front, which later evolved into *Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva* – the Socialist League of the Working

People, was deeply entrenched in a non-partisan sentiment of Slovenian polity; therefore, we can argue that it was a non-partisan party or a party of non-partisans (Lukšič 1994, 24).[4]

It was only in the late 1980s and early 1990s that political parties were revived, with the democratization of political life, culminating in the first post-war democratic elections, which were held in the spring of 1990. Thus, in Slovenia (only), an era of modern partisanship began in the early nineties. The end of the 1980s saw the formation of new political parties while the old socio-political organizations, which had, until then, enjoyed a guaranteed monopoly status in organizing and leading all political interests and activities, were transformed into new political parties (Krašovec 2000, 23). The first parties were able to register after The Societies Act had been amended, and during the 1990–1992 period 131 parties were registered. However, far fewer had made their appearance by the time of the 1992 elections. At first, parties were based on the protection of the interests of some social groups (peasants' party, intellectuals' party, pensioners' party, craftsmen's party, workers' party, etc.), and only later did they widen their profiles to become political parties as we know them today (Lukšič 2001, 38).

The commentary on the Political Parties Act (1994) mainly talks about the situation of parties in the legal system and not about parties in the political system. Political parties were defined as "a form of organization with a clearly defined ideology (a party's program is mentioned), whose goal is to contest or maintain political power through democratic elections. That is the reason political parties are organized groups with political goals that are distinguishable from other political organizations, whose members come together for the purpose of protecting defined interests with political means… political parties exercise their active role on all levels of public life." During the years Slovenia was seeking its independence, the newly established parties were primarily a vehicle of mass protest against the former regime and a form of striving for a more sovereign status of Slovenia, but they did not have any more precisely elaborated programs encompassing the most important spheres of life. The consequence of this was a low level of ideological differentiation, as the newly established political parties, though exhibiting greater ideological differences, had a single common goal for whose attainment they were prepared to push aside their ideological differences for some time (Krašovec 2000, 24).

Political parties are organizations that, in society and in the state, perform several different functions. According to the law, they have the right to participate in the formation of bodies of power, whereas other organizations do not possess this privilege (Lukšič 1994, 26). Through historical development, political parties have become actors that play key roles during elections to politically representative institutions and in candidate-selection processes for elections (Fink-Hafner and Krašovec 2000, 143). The latter is corroborated by the currently valid Political Parties Act (2005, orig. 1994), as it stipulates in Article 1 that a political party is "an association of citizens who realize their political goals, adopted by a party's program, by means of a democratic formation of political will of citizens and by proposing candidates at elections to the National Assembly, for the President of the Republic and to the bodies of local communities". Political parties are organizations that assist candidates in entering politically representative institutions; in exchange, the selected candidates are expected to be loyal to their political party and act in accordance

[4] For similar processes in other countries in the region, please see Turska-Kawa et al (2022, 22–25) and Janas and Jánošková (2022, 56–60).

with the party's expectations. As a reflection of the thesis that political parties are the main actors during parliamentary elections, we only see a relatively small number of independent candidates and an even smaller number of successful independent candidates. But this description does not apply equally to the local levels of government, as will be discussed a little later.

A relatively strong resistance to party politics can be recognized in the constitution since it only mentions political parties in a negative context (Lukšič 1994, 26). Article 42 of the Constitution states that membership in political parties is forbidden for professional members of police and the armed forces. The Constitution consistently reveals its liberal, anti-partisan nature, including an article that states that members of Parliament are representatives of the nation and are *not obliged to follow any directions.* The drafters of the Constitution realized that political parties exist, and that Parliament will always be a partisan institution, but political parties were still not given a natural right to be included in the Constitution (ibid., 27). Moreover, the apex of Slovenian distrust of parties is represented by a corporatist body – *Državni svet* – the National Council. It was supposed to be beyond the influence of political parties since the candidates for it are chosen by associations, social organizations and unions, chambers, and universities; that is, non-partisan organizations. However, half of its members, namely 22 representatives of local interests, are also elected to the National Council for each term of office, and these candidates appear on party lists. One, therefore, cannot say that the operation of this body is absolutely non-partisan. Despite all this, the National Council, besides the President of the Republic, still represents a certain locus within the Slovenian Constitution that deserves to be protected and cultivated to prevent the parties from completely dominating Slovenian politics (Lukšič 1994, 28).

Alenka Krašovec (2000, 26) states that a common problem of all Slovenian political parties is the problem of unsatisfied structural connections to society, as indicated in the negative public opinion of Slovenian political parties. Even though Slovenian public opinion strongly supported the pluralization of political space back in the early 1990s, which was somehow expressed in the 1990 plebiscite, the trust in political parties began to decline significantly soon after the multiparty system had been established. Trust in political parties has declined rapidly since 1991; in 1991, 12.1 percent of voters had high or moderate levels of trust in political parties; in 1995, this description only applied to 4.5 percent of voters (Toš in Krašovec 2000, 26), and in 2001 (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2001), to 9.3 percent of voters. At the end of 2008 (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2008), 9 percent of voters had high or moderate levels of trust in political parties, although 43 percent of voters had extensive levels of distrust. If we compare these data with the most recent ones (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2010), we see that the percentage of respondents who trust political parties has been constantly decreasing (now only 6 percent), whereas the share of those who express an open distrust in political parties has been on the increase (half of the respondents). As an interesting fact, we can also mention the data of the public opinion poll called Slovenski utrip (School of Advanced Social Studies 2010), as it shows that the question *"Which party would you vote for if parliamentary elections were held this Sunday?"* was answered with *"none"* by the largest percentage of respondents (24.7 percent).

To some degree, the distrust in political parties originates from the installation of parliamentary polity in Slovenia. Following many years of the single-party system, the citizens were not ready for parliamentary debates that publicly

exposed social controversies. Unfortunately, these controversies have not been interpreted in the spirit of a democratic confrontation of dissenting opinions, but as rows, and, hence, a view has emerged that the parliament is an unnecessary institution and that political parties are generators of quarrels. It has been the open representation of differing interests, which is otherwise typical of a developed parliamentary democracy that has earned political parties a negative label. However, the political elite has also contributed its fair share, viewing rejection of and disagreement with their positions in the context of political debates as personal assaults rather than as an ingredient of a political debate. The lack of trust in political parties is regarded because of the visible egoistic and ideologically burdened activity of political elites (Fink-Hafner 1997, 152). Politbarometer research (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2003a) ascertained that Slovenian political parties are among the least trusted institutions; moderate levels of trust in political parties could only be seen in 10 percent of voters, but, on the other hand, 42 percent of them had high levels of distrust. [5] The Politbarometer research (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2008) found that political parties are the least-trusted political organization among 24 listed political institutions and organizations.[6] The later data from the Politbarometer research (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2010) places political parties in the last position among the nineteen institutions, such that only 6 percent of people expressed trust and 50 percent expressed distrust. If we consider the different Politbarometer surveys conducted from 1996 onwards, we can comprehend that political parties are, among the five most important political institutions, [7] constantly the foci of most of the voters' distrust. The level of membership in political parties in Slovenia is quite low, especially in comparison with older EU members.[8] According to various sets of available data, around 10 percent of voters were members of a political party at the end of the previous decade (Krašovec 2000, 26),[9] just under 5 percent of voters were members of a political party in 2005 (Slovenian public opinion 2005),[10] and 6.5 percent of all voters were members of a political party in 2007 (Brezovšek et al. 2008, 148). The trend of non-partisan lists at the local level, which have been gaining ever-greater weight at local elections due to the present distrust in political parties, is also displayed by the data of the *Slovenski utrip* opinion poll (School of Advanced

[5] For comparison reasons, we should mention that political parties are the least-trusted political institution (10 percent of voters have at least moderate levels of trust; answers 1 and 2 combined); other institutions included in this survey: general courts (13 percent), the Catholic Church (21 percent), the Constitutional Court (23 percent), etc. In the case of the answer "I don't trust", results worse than those of political parties (who are not trusted by 42 percent of respondents) were achieved by the Catholic Church (47 percent) and legal courts (53 percent). The average mark (on a scale ranging from 1 – *"trust the least"* – to 5 – *"trust the most"*) – for political parties in November 2003 was 2,52, a result that placed political parties in the second-to-last place among all the institutions.

[6] On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents *"I trust the least"* and 5, *"I trust the most"*. For comparison, we can state that political institutions received an average grade (from three surveys conducted in April, June and December 2008) of 2.46, the Catholic Church received 2.47; general courts, 2.50; the government, 2.77.

[7] The President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the National Assembly, the Government of the Republic and political parties.

[8] See also Mair and Van Biezen (2001).

[9] Membership in political parties as a percentage of eligible voters is calculated based on data available from political parties and the official number of eligible voters for 1998. The Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), at the time, had (according to its own data) 5,342 members; the Slovenian People's Party (SPP), around 40,000; the Social Democratic Party (SDP), around 20,000; the Slovenian Christian Democrats (SCD), 36,576; the United List of Social Democrats (ULSD), around 23,000; the Democratic Party of Pensioners (DPP), 26,000; and the Slovenian National Party (SNP), 5,783 (Krašovec 2000, 26).

[10] Question 7.17: *"Are you a member of a political party?"* There were 42 "*yes*", 948 "*no*" and 12 "*I do not know*" answers.

Social Studies 2010), conducted in August 2010, when non-partisan (local) lists were recognized as the most popular among survey respondents – gaining theoretical voters' support of 42.9 percent. However, in the following section, we present the actual success of non-partisan candidates and lists at the recent local elections, whereby we also analyse in greater detail the results of the five consequent local elections, with an emphasis on the (growing) rates of success of non-partisan candidates and lists.

## 2 ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SLOVENIAN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

This chapter adopts the supposition that electoral systems have a strong influence on both the possibility of the candidacy of non-partisan candidates and lists and on the actual chances of being elected. The electoral system that is used for elections to the National Assembly discriminates in favour of established political parties; according to empirical evidence gathered from all five parliamentary elections carried out so far, non-partisan candidates and lists only have a slim chance of being elected. Since the country's attainment of independence in 1991, no non-partisan candidate has come even close to being elected to the National Assembly and, in addition, the number of such candidatures has always been small or even non-existent. During the National Assembly election in 2000, there were seven non-partisan candidates, but not even one managed to gather more than one percent of the votes; in 2004, there were three non-partisan candidates, and none even managed to attract more than 0.1 percent of the votes; and worse, at the subsequent elections for the National Assembly (2008 to 2022), there were no non-partisan candidates at all.[11] However, the situation is quite different at the local level of government. At mayoral elections, Slovenia applies a two-round absolute electoral system,[12] whereas, at municipal council elections, both a one-round relative majority and a proportional electoral system are used depending on the size of the municipality.[13]

We will focus our analysis initially on mayoral elections where we can state that candidates can be put forward by either (registered) political parties or groups of voters. Non-partisan candidates can only run with the support of a group of voters; the size of the groups again depends upon the size of the municipality in which the candidature is lodged.[14] This allows non-partisan candidates to realize their passive eligibility in a relatively undemanding way.

[11] State Electoral Commission (2022).

[12] The candidate is elected mayor if he receives most of the votes. If no candidate receives most of the votes, a second-round election involving the two candidates with the most votes is performed. If several candidates receive the same number of votes, the selection for the second-round election is performed by lot. Both candidates are listed on the ballot paper according to the number of votes they received in the first-round election. If the number of votes received is the same, the order on the ballot is determined by lot.

[13] If a municipal council has between 7 and 11 councillors inclusive, its members are chosen by a relative one-round majority electoral system. If a municipal council has 12 or more councillors, the members are chosen by a proportional electoral system involving the use of preferential voting (Local Elections Act 2017, Article 9).

[14] When a candidate for mayor is proposed by a group of voters, they need to accumulate at least two percent of the signatures of voters in the municipality who had universal suffrage at the last local elections, but no less than 15 and no more than 2,500 signatures (Local Elections Act 2017, Article 106).

The analysis of mayoral elections is relatively simple. Since the late 1990s, mayoral elections within the Slovenian local government system have been characterized by two complementary phenomena: the growing success of non-partisan candidates and the declining influence of political parties. As can be seen from Table 2, non-partisan candidates have won local elections by a relative majority ever since the first local elections in 1994. In 2014, non-partisan candidates also won local elections by an absolute majority, as for the first time, the mayors in more than half of the municipalities were non-partisan candidates. The number of non-partisan mayors only further increased at the local elections in 2018 (123) and yet again in 2022 (141). At the same time, however, it can be noted that at the level of local government only four political parties are constantly present and successful: three centre-right parties (Slovenian Democratic Party – SDS, Slovenian People's Party – SLS and New Slovenia–Christian Democrats – NSi) and the centre-left Social Democrats (SD). During the 2010–2014 period, the first party to lose support and then *de facto* disappear from the Slovenian political scene was the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS). At the same time, the most successful political party in Slovenian local elections to date, the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), faced some difficulties, as it became a non-parliamentary party following the underwhelming results at the 2014 parliamentary elections. At the 2018 local elections, only 69 mayors were members of the four strongest political parties (32 percent). A further 20 mayors (10 percent) were members of other political parties and various coalitions, while the remaining mayors (123 or 58 percent) were non-partisan. At the most recent local election, held in November 2022, only 52 mayors were members of the four strongest political parties (25 percent), which is lowest percentage since the independence of Slovenia; a further 18 mayors (8,5 percent) were members of other political parties and various coalitions, while remaining mayors (141 or 66,5 percent) were non-partisan. It is also interesting that all parliamentary parties represented in the National Assembly managed to get only 40 mayors, among those only 17 were members of the national ruling coalition.

TABLE 2: MAYORAL ELECTION RESULTS AT LOCAL ELECTIONS BETWEEN 1994 AND 2022

| | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 | 2014 | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-partisan candidates | 29 | 46 | 60 | 67 | 71 | 115 | 123 | 141 |
| Slovenian People's Party (SLS) | 27 | 39 | 45 | 49 | 41 | 31 | 26 | 15 |
| Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) | 23 | 22 | 28 | 17 | 13 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Social Democratic Party/Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) | 18 | 21 | 16 | 27 | 33 | 19 | 17 | 12 |
| United List of Social Democrats/Social Democrats (SD) | 13 | 10 | 13 | 13 | 20 | 20 | 16 | 14 |
| Slovenian Christian Democrats/New Slovenia (NSi) | 21 | 21 | 4 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 10 | 11 |
| Various coalitions | 13 | 26 | 23 | 19 | 14 | 8 | 8 | 9 |
| Other political parties | 3 | 6 | 4 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 11 | 9 |
| **TOTAL** | **147** | **192** | **193** | **210** | **210** | **212** | **212** | **212** |

Sources: Haček (2020) and own calculation based on data of the National Electoral Commission (2022).

It is a different story whether the candidates who ran for office with the support of the electorate are truly independent candidates, and to what extent are these candidates distinctly political. A greater analytical challenge is thus posed by formally non-partisan candidates who have had clear political affiliations in the past, some of them were even elected to office with the support of a particular political party or a group of political parties, and who have later, for one reason

or another, decided to run as non-partisan candidates in the local elections. This phenomenon is not unknown to Slovenian local elections. It has been occurring to a greater or lesser extent since the first local elections in 1994 (Kukovič and Haček 2011, 17; Kukovič et al. 2015; Kukovič 2018a, 85; Kukovič 2018b, 190), gaining some momentum at the latest local elections in 2022.

Three groups of political parties can be identified in the analysis of municipal council election results during the 1994–2022 period: a) parties that have been steadily losing their share of votes (and thus their share of elected municipal councillors) since the first municipal council elections in 1994, b) parties with fluctuating election results, and c) parties that have not stood in all the local elections so far. The Slovenian People's Party (SLS) belongs primarily to the first group. The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), New Slovenia–Christian Democrats (NSi), Social Democrats (SD), Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS), and Slovenian National Party (SNS) fall within the second group. The third group is composed of various parties that were formed and disappeared during the 1994–2022 period, among which the party that won the most votes in the 1998 and 2002 municipal council elections, the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), particularly stands out. The Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) undoubtedly experienced the biggest percentage drops compared to previous local elections. At the 2006 local elections, it received approximately eight percent fewer votes compared to the 2002 local elections and history then repeated itself in the 2010 and 2014 local elections, with the party virtually disappearing from the Slovenian political scene. Non-party lists fall into a separate category. Since the local elections in 1994, non-party lists have been seeing growing support and an increase in the share of votes. Note that the support of the two largest and best organized political parties in the country (SDS and SD) has been stable since the 1994 local elections (SD between 10 and 13 percent, SDS between 13 and 18 percent), which also indicates they have the most loyal and consolidated electorate. While Social Democrats (SD) have never been the political party with the most votes in municipal council elections, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) received the highest share of votes in the 2014, 2018 (Haček 2020) and 2022 municipal council elections among registered political parties.

Another characteristic observed in every local election since 1994 is the slightly better performance of centre-right political parties in smaller municipalities and, vice versa, a slightly better performance of centre-left political parties in larger municipalities (Kukovič and Haček 2018). It is also interesting to note that throughout the local government reform project, the centre-left political parties have consistently advocated for the establishment of larger municipalities and have largely opposed the fragmentation of municipalities, while centre-right political parties have mainly promoted establishing new (and generally smaller) municipalities.

TABLE 3: MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTION RESULTS AT LOCAL ELECTIONS BETWEEN 1994 AND 2022 (IN PERCENT)

| | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 | 2014 | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-partisans | 9 | 12 | 17 | 20 | 22 | 29 | 32 | 37 |
| Slovenian People's Party (SLS) | 13 | 12 | 11 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 7 |
| Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) | 17 | 23 | 23 | 15 | 7 | - | - | - |
| Social Democratic Party/Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) | 14 | 16 | 13 | 17 | 18 | 14 | 17 | 18 |
| United List of Social Democrats/Social Democrats (SD) | 13 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 10 | 10 | 9 |
| Slovenian Christian Democrats/New Slovenia (NSi) | 18 | 12 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 9 |
| Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS) | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 9 | 7 | 5 | - |
| Modern Centre Party (SMC) | - | - | - | - | - | 11 | 4 | - |
| Freedom Movement (GS) | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 12 |
| Slovenian National Party (SNS) | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | - |
| Youth Party of Slovenia (SMS) | | - | 4 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Zares Party | - | - | - | | 4 | - | - | - |
| Left Party (Levica) | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 1 |
| List of Marjan Šarec (LMŠ) | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - |

Note: only municipalities using proportional electoral system are included.
Source: Haček (2020) and own calculation based on the data of the National Electoral Commission (2022).

Researchers have found that the performance of political parties in the first and second local elections in 1994 and 1998 (Haček 1999) was also largely dependent on the level of development of the organizational network of municipal and local committees, which were (un)able to find suitable candidates, draw up lists of candidates and file for candidacies. In the quarter of a century since the reintroduction of local government in Slovenia, a group of political parties that have stood for all local elections so far has managed to build an organizational network throughout Slovenia. Therefore, other performance factors have come to the forefront. In the last decade, a particularly important factor was voters' general distrust of political parties. This makes it difficult for the parties to find a set of suitable candidates that are indispensable in local elections, and it negatively affects their performance in local elections. Non-partisan candidates and local non-party lists have been steadily gaining support in municipal councillor elections.

When analysing Slovenian election results, however, one should not overlook gender representation in elected local government bodies. An analysis of the nominations shows that there were 102 female mayoral candidates in the local elections in 2018. Women ran for mayor in 83 municipalities in total and were victorious in 22 municipalities; female mayors are most successful in smaller municipalities (Kukovič 2019, 118; Prebilič and Kukovič 2021, 335).

An analysis of the nominations shows that there were even a bit more (107) female mayoral candidates in the most recent local elections in 2022, and they were also more successful, as 23 were elected in the first round, and additional six in the second. Women ran for mayor in 84 municipalities in total and were victorious in 29 municipalities; for the first time ever there was municipality with at least two candidates that were all female. Table 4 shows the statistics of female mayoral candidates in local elections in the period from 1994 to 2022.

TABLE 4: NUMBER OF FEMALE MAYORAL CANDIDATES AT LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE PERIOD FROM 1994 TO 2022

| | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 | 2014 | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of municipalities | 147 | 192 | 193 | 210 | 211 | 212 | 212 | 212 |
| Number of all mayoral candidates | 635 | 750 | 724 | 847 | 783 | 811 | 794 | 618 |
| Number of female mayoral candidates | 31 | 53 | 77 | 91 | 94 | 108 | 102 | 107 |
| Percentage of female candidates | 4,9 | 7,1 | 10,6 | 10,7 | 12,0 | 13,3 | 12,8 | 17,3 |
| **NUMBER OF ELECTED FAMALE MAYORS** | **2 (1,4%)** | **8 (4,2%)** | **11 (5,7%)** | **7 (3,3%)** | **10 (4,7%)** | **16 (7,5%)** | **22 (10,4%)** | **29 (13,7%)** |
| Percentage of female municipal councilors elected at local elections | 10,7 | 11,9 | 13,1 | 21,5 | 22 | 31,7 | 33,2 | 33,9 |

Sources: Kukovič and Haček (2022, 482) and own calculation based on the data of the National Electoral Commission (2022).

The number of females is also steadily increasing in the municipal councils; at the most recent local elections (2022), 1,168 female municipal councillors[15] were elected, representing a share of 33.9 percent. The increase in the number of female council representatives from 2006 onward is most likely a result of the 2005 legislative change that introduced a clause on equal opportunities of both genders to the electoral legislation (see Kukovič and Haček 2018; also see Kukovič 2019).

In the most recent completed term from 2018 to 2022 there were 65 municipalities with a majority electoral system with 594 municipal councillors, of which 136 (22.9 percent) were women. There were four municipalities with a majority principle that had all male representatives on the municipal council; however, there were no municipalities with all female representatives. In 147 municipalities with a proportional election, there were in total of 2,740 municipal councillors, of which 974 (35.5 percent) were female and 1,766 (64.5 percent) were male. The latter confirms the thesis that the proportional electoral principle gives women a greater opportunity for election. Compared to municipalities with a majority electoral principle, the proportion of women elected in municipalities with a proportional electoral principle was higher by 12.6 percent (Kukovič 2019). If we compare this data with the share of females elected to the national parliament at the most recent parliamentary elections in 2022 (40 percent),[16] we can observe that the share of females in municipal councils is on a bit lower level.

The institute of positive discrimination has been introduced in some Slovenian municipalities, which means that voters in those municipalities also elect local representatives of the Italian and Hungarian national minorities and Roma community, slightly increasing the size of the council. Twenty-one candidates ran for nine local representatives of the Italian national minority in four coastal municipalities in 2022; out of nine elected, there are three females. For seven local representatives of the Hungarian national minority in five municipalities in Pomurje, there have been just nine candidates in total in 2022, and a single female was elected.

[15] Seven out of 1,168 female councilors are female representatives of Italian and Hungarian national minorities and Roma community.

[16] Gender structure of the National Assembly has changed quite a bit since independence, as follows: National Assembly elections 1992 (14 female MPs), 1996 (7), 2000 (12), 2004 (11), 2008 (12), 2011 (29), 2014 (31), 2018 (22) and 2022 (36) (State Electoral Commission 2022).

The number of candidates for the local representative of the Roma community has been slowly declining since 2006 and has reached the bottom at the most recent local elections in 2022 (twenty-four candidates for eighteen council seats in eighteen municipalities) with two municipalities where elections had to be re-called due to lack of candidates.

## 3 SO, WHY ARE NON-PARTISAN CANDIDATES AND LISTS SO SUCCESSFUL?

When considering all the local elections held thus far in the country, we face the inevitable question of why non-partisan candidates and lists are (increasingly) successful. Because of ongoing debates and empirical research projects, we can assert that the phenomenon of the relative success of non-partisan candidates and lists at the local level[17] has at least three origins.

First, at the national level, non-partisan candidates have literally no chance of being elected to the national parliament due to the existing electoral system and the explicitly emphasized role of political parties. Accordingly, their only viable option for successfully realizing their passive suffrage is to stand as candidates at local elections. There, the majority electoral system, which is used for mayoral elections and elections of the municipal council in small municipalities, is more supportive of non-partisan candidates and lists than the proportional electoral system applied at parliamentary elections or the municipal council elections of bigger municipalities. Yet, notwithstanding this and despite the proportional electoral system, we can (at the local elections in 2006 and subsequent years) see that non-partisan candidates and lists are gaining ground also in bigger municipalities and even the big cities. Especially notable were the successes of some non-partisan lists in the largest municipalities. Second, one can detect in Slovenia a strong tradition of non-partisanship; or, in other words, Slovenian political parties constantly attract some sort of distrust or criticism (Lukšič 1994), which has, due to the deepening of the economic crisis in the last two years, achieved a new negative peak. While Slovenian public opinion is clearly not in favour of political parties, it is also true that for quite some time levels of trust in political parties are lower than in other political institutions. Finally, local elections are also more suitable for realizing the passive suffrage of non-partisan candidates due to their narrower scope. Namely, at local elections, voters choose candidates who come from the same place they themselves originate from and live in and so party allegiance does not play as important a role as it does on the national level. It is often the case that voters know the candidates personally, especially in very small municipalities. The candidacy and election of someone not linked to a party can contribute to local inhabitants' perception that in their own municipality they can exercise their right to local government, as guaranteed by Article 9 of the Slovenian Constitution. The analysis of electoral results at local elections indicates the relative improvement of political parties' results with an

[17] It is important to hereby emphasise that the phenomenon of the growing successfulness of non-partisan candidates and lists is not an exclusively Slovenian peculiarity that would be determined by the specificities of a Slovenian setting, but it is a phenomenon many foreign authors expose in their analyses as well. For instance, Ylönen (2007, 7) and Wörlund (2007) find in the cases of Finnish and Swedish local elections, respectively, a several-fold increase of voters' support of Finnish or Swedish non-partisan lists over the recent decades, whereby it needs to be stressed that non-partisan lists have not yet become the key political force in either of the two countries. However, an altogether different picture is valid, e.g., for the Netherlands (Boogers 2007), where non-partisan lists are the strongest local-level political force that won a quarter of all votes during both the 2002 and 2006 local elections.

increase in the size of a municipality, but, despite this, in bigger municipalities, non-partisan candidates and lists are also at least equally successful as political parties (Kukovič and Haček 2011).

When comprehensively analysing local elections, one should not forget another crucial issue, namely the problem of the actual political independence of non-partisan candidates. We have clearly found that the trends during Slovenian local elections have been and still are in favour of non-partisan candidates, which is peculiarly true of mayoral elections. For the average Slovenian voter, a candidate's independence is his second-most important quality, immediately after their previous experience.[18] Further, the average voter puts a candidate's independence before their affiliation to a political party and before personal familiarity with a candidate (Kukovič 2018b, 188–189). In comparison with parliamentary elections, in local elections, a candidate's party affiliation is far less important to the average voter.[19] It is obvious that on the local level, there must be a ubiquitous anti-party frame of mind that is ultimately verified when looking at the results of numerous public opinion polls.[20] On the other hand, it is particularly interesting to consider the actual independence of many non-partisan candidates. If we only take the mayoral elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 into consideration, when 71, 115, 123 and 141 non-partisan mayors were elected, respectively, and we simply superficially browse through the list of names of the elected mayors, we can easily find names that are not only clearly (known) members of a major political party, but also former members of the national parliament. There were even instances, when established political parties and their leaders congratulated to elected non-partisan mayors just hours after elections were concluded, declaring them as "our members". This simple, non-scientific finding should by itself be sufficient to allow some doubt in the true independence and anti-partisanship of several of these elected officials. An equally important indicator of the actual independence of the candidates is their post-election coalition building since non-partisan candidates and lists tend to form coalitions with political parties just as frequently as candidates and lists proposed by political parties (see Haček et al. 2017, 167). Or, as Gramsci (1977, 1573) wrote a long time ago, "in a certain society no one is disorganized and without a political party…, parties can act under different names and labels, even as "anti-parties" but even so-called individuals are actually people-parties, they only want to be party leaders in acknowledgment of God and of the imbecility of those following them".

As a matter of fact, the 2022 local elections can be designated as elections during which trends from the preceding local elections continued and fortified; as

[18] The research project "Viewpoints on local democracy" (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2003b), question 3.20: *"How important for you are the following characteristics of individual candidates when voting at local elections? For each statement, choose a figure between 1 and 5, where 1 means it is not important at all, and 5 means it is essential."* The average values of the answers were: a) affiliation to a political party, 2.90; b) political experience, 3.90; c) gender of the candidate 1.78; d) I know the candidate personally, 2.56; and e) independence of the candidate, 3.23.

[19] The research project "Viewpoints on local democracy" (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2003b), question 3.21: *"Is the party affiliation of a candidate more important for you at parliamentary or local elections?"* Scores of answers: it is more important at parliamentary elections (26.2 percent); it is equally (in)significant at both elections (49.9 percent); it is more important at local elections (6.8 percent); do not know, cannot decide (17.2 percent).

[20] For instance, the research project "Viewpoints on local democracy" (Centre for Public Opinion Research 2003b), question 3.40: *"Who do you trust most in your municipality?"*. Scores of answers: the mayor (45.5 percent); the municipal council (21.5 percent); the municipal administration (5 percent); political parties (2.7 percent); do not know (25.2 percent).

elections at which the only true and undisputed winners were the voters, who, by virtue of their electoral choice, once again, but this time in the most explicit manner thus far, expressed their dissatisfaction and distrust with political parties and their ways of managing municipalities.

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# SLOVENSKE LOKALNE VOLITVE OD 1994 DO 2022: KRALJESTVO NESTRANKARSKIH LIST IN ŽUPANOV

*Volitve v predstavniška telesa so v demokratičnih državah osnovno orodje uresničevanja oblasti in najrazpoznavnejše zunanje znamenje demokracije. O institutu lokalnih volitev je bilo prelitega že mnogo črnila in tiskanih že mnogo znanstvenih ter strokovnih prispevkov, kar velja tudi za slovenske lokalne volitve. V analizi dosedanjih osmih lokalnih volitev, ki so potekale od leta 1994 naprej, bila velikokrat poudarjena ugotovitev, da so lokalne volitve napram parlamentarnim volitvam nekoliko podcenjene in zapostavljene, pa tudi mediji jih pogosto obravnavajo kot priročno sredstvo za ugotavljanje volilnega razpoloženja v času med zaporednimi parlamentarnimi volitvami. Ob tem je ostalo relativno neopaženo, da imajo lokalne volitve podobno vlogo in pomen kot parlamentarne volitve, le da se izvajajo na bistveno manjšem ozemlju, v bistveno manjših skupnostih in imajo drugačen vsebinski predznak; pomenijo pa najpomembnejši vpliv prebivalcev lokalne skupnosti na delovanje lokalne samouprave, zato predstavljajo temeljno prvino lokalne demokracije. V prispevku analiziramo bistvene značilnosti dosedanjih osmih lokalnih volitev v samostojni Sloveniji s poudarkom na zadnjih, ki so potekale novembra 2022.*

**Ključne besede:** volitve; lokalna oblast; nestrankarstvo; politične stranke; Slovenija.

# VOX POPULI, VOX DEI: LOCAL REFERENDA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2000– 2020

**Petr BLÁHA**[1]

*The present study focuses on the use of the local referendum instrument in the Czech Republic between 2000 and 2020. This form of citizen participation in political decision making has become widely and widely used. Based on a complete overview of referenda, an analysis of the distribution of referenda in individual regions is carried out, which clearly shows that referenda are held significantly more often in some regions, which is determined by specific issues of safety or the location of nuclear power plants. In line with Robert Dahl's assumption, it turns out that the highest percentage of referenda are held in smaller municipalities, but this does not usually mean a higher turnout. It turns out that the importance of the issue is often more crucial than other factors. For example, the combination with an election has been shown to be a factor that does not have a major impact on overall participation. The ratio of binding to non-binding referenda shows that this instrument is used very effectively and efficiently, so that most of the referenda held are binding and are used to address issues that have the potential to mobilise citizens.*

**Key words:** referendum; participation; democracy; civil society; Czech Republic.

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In recent years, debates about the crisis of democratic systems, or rather the crisis of liberal democracy, have become more frequent. However, these debates are not new at all and, at their deepest, are a concomitant of the whole process of democratic establishment. One of the most influential critics of liberal democracy in its parliamentary form was Carl Schmitt (1923), whose work, originally written in 1923, strongly influenced not only conservative thought, but also many other political theorists across the political spectrum. On the other hand, when

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looking at the development of democracy as such, it is necessary to realise that everything is not as clear-cut as it might seem. Bernard Manin (1997) argues and demonstrates quite convincingly that the traditional understanding of the representative model as synonymous with democracy is rather mistaken and that democracy needs to be understood in a much broader context. Even today, the nature of democratic governance is a matter of broad professional but also societal debate that seeks to reflect a greater degree of citizen involvement in political decision making, i.e., calls for a greater degree of citizen participation (Pateman 2000; Della Porta 2013).

In the context of the discussed crisis of legitimacy of democratic governance not only in the V4 area, this issue has naturally also appeared in the Czech political environment. Furthermore, we can register the discussion on the importance of referenda in the V4 countries, for example in the context of Poland (Turska-Kawa and Wojtasik 2018). The Czech party system underwent quite dramatic changes in the period after the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union, which were also related to the emergence of several new political parties (Maškarinec and Bláha 2014; Šárovec 2016). Among them, there are also parties that, on the one hand, slide towards a populist form of communication (Naxera 2021). The issue of referenda is an integral part of their programmes, with a referendum at national level being a fundamental problem. This is enshrined in the Czech constitution, but there is no act implementing it, so referenda do not take place at this level. De facto, there are no regional referenda either, so the only referenda that take place are referenda at local level. These are the subjects of this text.

The crisis of the so-called civic sector and the related declining level of civic participation (Frič 2016) is also being discussed very intensively, often explained by the lack of interest of citizens. However, the claim about the underdevelopment of civil society is, in a certain perspective, a kind of mantra referring to the authority of Ralf Dahrendorf's famous statement about the necessity of three generations to establish a functional civil society (Dahrendorf 1990). In his study on political activism, Ondřej Císař points out that the level of civic activism may not be nearly as trivial as research shows, as it is rather the question of how participation is understood by researchers that plays a key role (Císař 2008, 25). If individual participation, measured by organised membership, is considered, the indicators in CEE countries are generally low, except perhaps for trade unions, which can, however, be seen partly as a post-communist legacy. These data are undeniable, but somewhat reductive, because if other researchers (Petrova and Tarrow 2007) shifted the focus from individual participation to the organizational level, a well-developed network of advocacy organizations emerges. However, this significantly contradicts the conclusions of the first approach. However, other forms of civic participation also include other activities (Navrátil and Kluknavská 2020), such as participation in local referenda. This is what we will seek to analyse in the context of the Czech Republic in the following text, which will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How intensively are local referenda used in the Czech Republic?
2. What is the success rate of referenda?
3. Are there differences between the use of referenda in different regions?
4. Is there a relationship between the size of the municipality and the use of referenda?
5. Does concurrence with elections affect the success rate of referenda?

## 2 DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND REFERENDUM IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Discussions about direct democracy traditionally refer to the period of ancient Athens, which is generally considered to be the cradle of democracy. However, it should be noted that it is not possible to understand democracy there as a suitable variant from today's perspective. Decision-making rights are in the hands of a limited number of inhabitants or citizens. However, citizenship was a highly exclusive matter, subject to several restrictions (most notably gender), and the number of citizens entitled to make political decisions was limited. From today's perspective, we could not talk about democracy in such a setting at all. In the subsequent medieval era, the idea of direct democracy and citizen involvement in political decision-making was completely abandoned, as the authority of the state was derived from the authority of God. The turning point in this respect comes only with the events of the modern revolutions, especially the revolution in England, which culminated in the execution of King Charles I and the absolute turn in political theory towards a contractualist approach. Both Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan (Hobbes 2009), and John Locke in his Second Treatise of Government (Locke 1980) no longer derive the power of the state from God but from the citizens. The events of the Great French Revolution, then, influenced by the thought of Rousseau (2006) were only the completion of this process. Rousseau himself says that the people represent the principle of the so-called general will. It should be pointed out, however, that the general will in this conception is not the mathematical sum of the votes of all the citizens, but rather the principle of the common good, but it does recommend that the people should meet regularly to decide political questions, and it is the will of the people that is superior to the decisions of officials. Here we can indeed speak of a certain renaissance of the principles of direct democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his analysis of American democracy (Tocqueville 2009), also perceived the question of citizens' association as one of the key issues for the development of democratic systems, defending the interests of citizens and protecting them from possible tyranny. Citizens' organizations are usually seen as an indicator of the quality of democracy and are an essential element of a democratic society.

In the following years, however, there was a shift away from greater citizen involvement in the decision-making process, even at the theoretical level, with Schumpeter (2003) reducing citizen involvement in the political process in his definition to a regular electoral act where citizens cast their vote and further do not interfere in any way in political decision-making throughout the term. Such an approach is, of course, mostly unsustainable today and lacks the elements of active citizenship that we consider central to the functioning of democracy itself. Karl Raimund Popper (2002a; 2002b) followed up to some extent with his conception that democracy should also be subjected to constant critical reflection as a tool to make the democratic process more effective and as a control mechanism, but that this form of control and reflection should also take place in regular elections, where voters do not re-elect their representative if dissatisfied.

In the context of further developments in modern political thought and democratic theory, other models that attempt to find alternatives to the representative model and opportunities for greater citizen participation in political decision-making are receiving increasing attention. The main of these models then are the models of participatory democracy, which is mainly

associated with the theoretical work of Carole Pateman (2000) and which is now being built upon around the world with the so-called participatory budget, and the second model is deliberative democracy, the elaboration and popularisation of which has been stimulated by Jürgen Habermas (2005). However, several theorists have now argued that the two models of democracy have de facto similar starting points and goals, a point that Diana Mutz (2006) has elaborated on in more detail. As a rule, these much discussed models today run into the fact that they are very difficult to implement at the national level, which is why, from our point of view, the so-called third generation of deliberative democracy might seem to be the most relevant one, which has started to intensively address the question of the practical implementation of so-called deliberative forums, which could eliminate the conceptual shortcomings and problematic moments of the implementation of the deliberative process (and indeed of the process of direct democracy) in the setting of mass democracies.

This is the problem pointed out by Dahl (1998, 103–118) in his book On Democracy, where he takes the position that the size of a given unit, both in terms of territory and population, is a crucial factor influencing the possibilities of realizing broader citizen participation and possible direct democracy, where, of course, an inverse proportionality applies. Thus, the smaller the unit, the greater the possibilities for implementation. Common to most of the attempts made so far in the world is the resolution of issues that could be considered less fundamental to society (Znoj, Bíba and Vargovčíková 2014, 89), except for the technically successful but legislatively unsuccessful attempt to draft a new constitution for Iceland (Della Porta 2020). However, this case also showed that the possibility of citizen participation in national-level issues can work very well. Although, of course, it must be remembered that Iceland's population is around 320 000, which makes such a process much easier.

## 3 LEGISLATIVE ANCHORING OF THE REFERENDUM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Voter participation is often cited as the most typical example of civic participation in liberal democracies, but it has been on a downward trend in recent years in many countries. This phenomenon has recently received considerable attention in the Czech Republic as well, both at the national (Linek 2010; Linek 2013), regional (Kouba and Lysek 2021), local (Maškarinec 2022) levels, but also in international comparison (Nový 2015). However, unconventional forms of political participation also receive attention (Císař, Navrátil and Vráblíková 2011), although the theoretical grasp of the phenomenon of local referenda in the Czech Republic is somewhat problematic. The authors differ in their views on this issue. According to Pavol Frič (2016, 99), this is a participatory technique standing on the borderline between conventional and unconventional participation, but it is still, together with local elections, the most effective tool for influencing politics through civic participation at the municipal level (Čermák et al 2011). Similarly, Michael L. Smith (2009) considers the referendum to be a perfectly legitimate instrument. However, the problem arises in understanding the local referendum as a borderline type of participation in terms of conventionality. The local referendum, together with the regional referendum, is enshrined in the legal system of the Czech Republic, unlike the law on the national referendum, which has not yet entered into force. However, this fact is most controversial, as a certain view puts a legal act of civic participation anchored in legislation on the

edge of conventionality. This is because local referenda are largely used as a tool of citizen protest and are often triggered by civil society organisations or civic activists. In our case, however, we try to understand civil society and participation more in the context of how Alexis de Tocqueville understood them, i.e., as specific schools of democracy, the dismantling of which would lead to a reduction in the level of democracy; for this reason we see citizens' interest as a desirable phenomenon and do not try to judge it from a national level. One of these key issues is precisely the involvement of citizens in political decision-making through referenda.

The Act on Local Referenda has been part of the legislation since 1992, when Act No.298/1992 Sb. came into force. Other legal amendments have been made on the issues of validity and bindingness, namely Act No.22/2004 Sb. and Act No.169/2008 Sb., which brought a relatively significant simplification in the issue of local referenda. In the Czech Republic, a referendum can be called in principle in two ways, either by a decision of the council or by a proposal of the preparatory committee. However, this must still be followed by a proclamation of the council. However, to submit a proposal (in the case of a preparatory committee), it is necessary to provide a predetermined percentage of signatures of eligible residents, which is inversely proportional to the size of the municipality. Act No. 169/2008 Sb., submitted by the government of Mirek Topolánek in 2007, brought, first, complications in the approval process (Balík 2017, 65), but also the distinction of the quorum for validity and bindingness, which would be truly distinctive. The threshold for the validity of a referendum was lowered to 35%. This was also expected to result in a higher chance of referenda being feasible in larger municipalities.

The Czech Republic is specific in relatively strong population homogeneity, which prevents or rather suppresses significant regional differences in the identity of the population. As far as differences between regions are concerned, they are determined more by socio-economic status, which not infrequently influences the political orientation and level of participation of the population, while in other countries referenda are often a manifestation of regional identity (Stjepanović and Tierney 2019). In the Czech context, the capital city of Prague, which is also an independent region, has an extremely specific position (Blažek and Uhlíř 2007), while other regions show specific values of the level of political trust and participation more in relation to the political situation (Čermák, Mikešová and Stachová 2016). As a result, regions often develop in a highly asymmetric way and the degree of decentralisation of regional politics leads to significant differences, with some regions having a 'structurally handicapped' status (Baun and Marek 2007), which is reflected not only in the issue of referenda, but also in political representation in general, where, with a few exceptions, more prominent regional political actors are absent (Pink and Eibl 2018). Thus, the referendum cannot be understood as a manifestation of regionalism, but rather as a symptom of the political and socio-economic situation of a given region, reflecting the will and satisfaction of citizens regarding the need to intervene in public affairs.

## 4 DATA AND ANALYSIS

The analysis was carried out based on a dataset containing all local referenda in the Czech Republic held between 2000 and 2020. This dataset was created based on the publicly accessible database of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech

Republic. However, it contains only referenda held since 2006, as the Ministry did not collect data on local referenda before 2006. The information has therefore been supplemented with the kind permission of Michael L. Smith, who obtained information on referenda not included in the official database for his studies (2007; 2009) and willingly provided this information. The total dataset thus contains information on 378 local referenda (272 of which were eventually binding) implemented between 2000 and 2020 on the territory of the Czech Republic, which was subsequently supplemented with additional data such as the coincidence with elections, etc. Despite this, the analysed dataset has certain limitations, for example in referenda with an unannounced result, but it is still the most reliable source that can show us quite interesting data. However, for our case, we individually searched for unannounced referenda, for example, in local periodicals, so we were able to complete the dataset for the years 2006-2020.

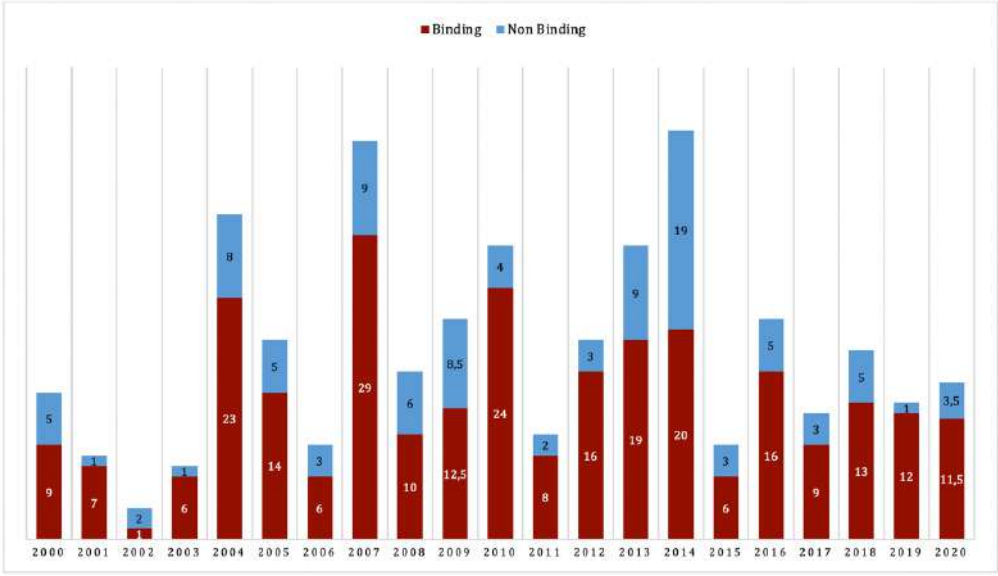
One cannot look for linear dependencies in the rate of implementation of referenda, but according to Balík, these are rather random waves caused by key issues such as the placement of the US radar in Brdy in 2007 or the large wave of referenda on the gambling ban in 2013-2014 (Balík 2017, 68). We should also add that another strong year, 2004, was mainly marked by referenda on nuclear waste repositories. On the other hand, 2006, 2011 and 2015 were the weakest years in terms of implementation, when, however, it was not so much the legislative obstacles that played a significant role, but rather the general lack of interest in using the instrument as a corrective to certain social injustices or other more socially resonant issues. It can also be concluded from the fact that after the above-mentioned legislative amendments, no significant constant increase in the number of referenda implemented can be observed.

### 4.1 Evolution of the number of referenda in each year and their binding nature

The referendum first appeared in the Czech environment in 2000 and since then it has been a tool used to address a range of local issues and problems. The average number of referenda in one year is 18 referenda with announced results. In the first year, 14 referenda were held, but in subsequent years the number was lower, with only three referenda held in 2002 and only one ultimately binding. However, 2004 saw an increase in the number of referenda as the issue of nuclear waste disposal began to be addressed in connection with the commissioning of the Temelín Nuclear Power Station. The 31 referenda carried out were the third highest number of referenda carried out in one year.

Two years later, in 2006, the Temelín Plant was fully operational and approved, putting the repository issue back in the spotlight and 38 referenda were held. This number has only been surpassed once, in 2014, when 39 referenda were held. This year was thematically linked to the issue of regulating gambling in some municipalities, which was reflected in the frequency and preferred topics of the referenda. The following year, only nine referenda were held. Subsequently, however, the number stabilised again, and its variance corresponds to an average of 18 referenda per year. It should be noted, however, that the number of referenda held was undoubtedly influenced by the easing of the conditions in 2008.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF REFERENDA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND LEVEL OF BINDING



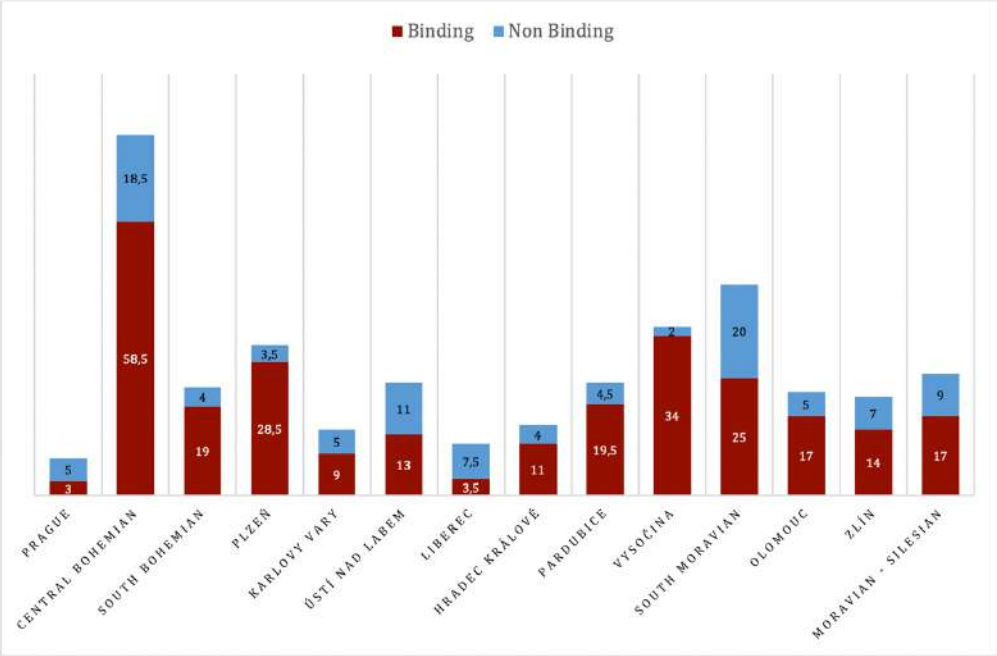

Source: own processing based on available data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and Michael L. Smith's dataset-

## 4.2 Development of the number of referenda in individual regions

A glance at the number of referenda in individual regions shows an indisputable fact. Referenda are not used evenly, so it can be assumed that local specifics, be it the regional political culture or the socio-economic situation, play a significant role in this phenomenon. Looking at the data, the 0.5 values can be slightly misleading, which could be explained as a kind of semi-referendum. But what is it? In some referenda, for example, there were two or even more questions, and it happened that some of them were not binding, although others asked in the same referendum were. In this case, we decided to enter a proportional part in the result so that the total number of referenda remained unchanged. A value of 0.5 therefore means that half of the questions were binding and the other half not.

The imaginary winner was the Central Bohemian Region, which carried out 77 referenda, that is, the absolute most of all and more than a fifth of all the referenda carried out. The second, the South Moravian Region, implemented more than thirty fewer referenda, exactly 45. The difference between these two regions corresponds, for the sake of illustration, approximately to the sum of the number of referenda carried out in Prague, Liberec and Karlovy Vary. Although the Central Bohemian Region was mainly affected by the radar topic in Brdy and the expansion of the airport in Vodochody into an international one, the South Moravian Region does not have its own "big topic". These are local topics that do not have a significant common denominator. In the case of large, society-wide topics such as the Brdy radar, nuclear waste or airport expansion, the higher rate is understandable and well explained, but the South Moravian Region really made do with local topics. On the other hand, the capital city of Prague struggled with the inefficiency of the use of the instrument, which is probably due to the size of the territorial units and the number of eligible voters, and thus the higher number of voters required for a referendum to be binding. The topics in Prague were almost exclusively related to transport policy or gambling, which seem to be topics that fail to fully mobilise citizens.

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF REFERENDA BY REGION




Source: own processing based on available data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and Michael L. Smith's dataset.

## 4.3 Referendum Topics and Other Findings

Pavol Frič's research shows that more than half of local referenda are held in municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants (Frič 2016, 101), which only confirms Dahl's belief that direct democracy activities are easier to implement in smaller units. Moreover, Michal Nový points out, based on an analysis of referenda, that a key factor positively influencing active participation of citizens are the so-called NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) questions (Nový 2016, 497). These often confront citizens with decisions that directly affect the lives of the community, be it the construction of wind turbines or the establishment of a landfill on the territory of the municipality. The urgency of these issues usually leads not only to greater citizen participation but also to a greater degree of binding and validity of the referenda. It can often be objected that on NIMBY issues, citizens tend to exercise their personal interest and the interest of the local community over higher interests, which can mean complications for politics at the national level.

Stanislav Balík then summarises the subject matters of the referenda by stating that the issues of restricting construction in connection with business and the development of municipal property are of the highest interest, although issues such as the establishment of a nuclear waste repository or the construction of wind power plants play an important role, while the issues of transport and photovoltaics are at the tail of the frequency (Balík 2017, 74). However, several political parties are now pushing for greater use of referenda at the highest level of politics. The Pirates are a typical representative, actively trying to promote more prominent elements of direct democracy (Charvát 2015; Maškarinec 2020; Naxera 2021).

### 4.4 Size of the municipality and the coincidence with elections

In the Czech Republic, since the introduction of the referendum instrument, a total of 378 local referenda on various issues have been held in the last 20 years. Whether it is questions of construction, merging municipalities, nuclear waste disposal or somewhat non-standard issues such as the future of the municipal restaurant. Of the 378 referenda held, 272 were binding, i.e., 72%. This shows that referenda are relatively successful and that they are being carried out on issues in which citizens have a genuine interest.

Of the total, 275 referenda were not held at the same time as elections, which is generally seen as a tool that usually helps to increase participation, making it more likely that the referendum will be binding. Despite this, a total of 272 referenda were binding, indicating a much greater experience in working with this tool, which leads to a more effective use. Citizens certainly prefer to decide on issues that affect them directly, but there is also a shift in the way referenda are called, towards a more effective use of this instrument.

The Central Bohemian Region clearly dominates in the inter-regional comparison, with 77 referenda, but it should be noted that a large part of them concerned the radar in Brdy. On the other hand, the least use of referenda is in the territory of the capital city of Prague, which is probably due to the size of the municipality, and in the Liberec Region, which has long exhibited a specific form of political competition, as local groups have traditionally scored more points here. These two regions are also the only ones where most referenda were not binding (in Prague 62.5% non-binding and in Liberec 68.2%), while the most effective regions were South Moravia (only 5.5% non-binding) and Plzeň (10.94%). The average value of the binding rate is thus about 72% in favour of binding.

If we look seriously at Dahl's assumption that forms of direct democracy are more appropriate for smaller municipalities or communities, then there is an inverse proportion between the chance of implementation and the size of the unit, that is, the larger the municipality, the lower the chance of implementation. If we look at the size of municipalities in which local referenda were implemented between 2000 and 2020, more than half were carried out in municipalities with up to 1,000 eligible voters, and if we also look at municipalities with up to 5,000 eligible voters, the total is more than 80% of all local referenda carried out.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF REFERENDA BY MUNICIPALITY SIZE

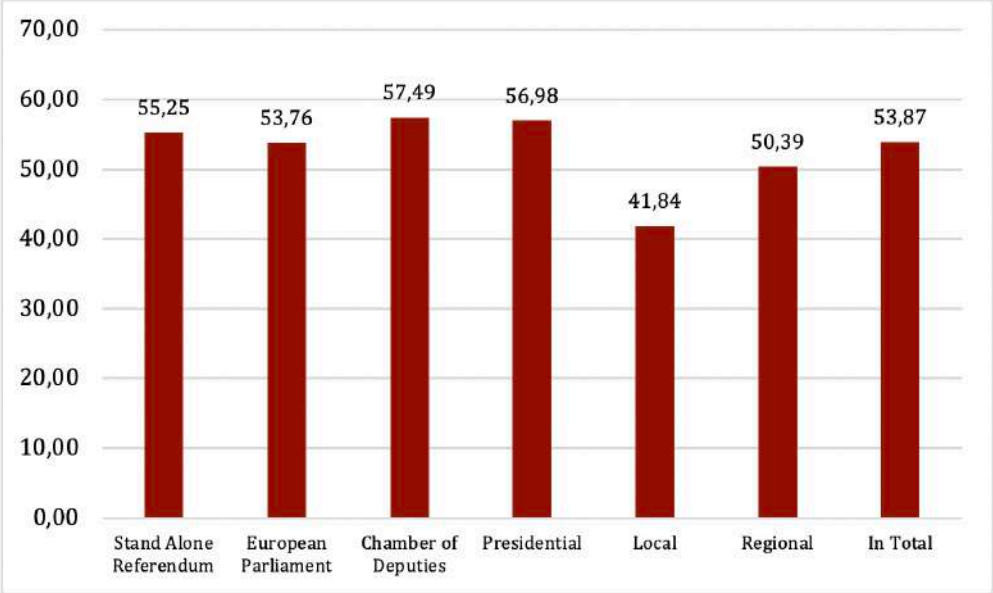
| Municipality by number of voters | 0–999 | 1,000–4,999 | 5,000–9,999 | 10,000–49,999 | 50,000–99,999 | 100,000 and more |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of referenda | 217 | 100 | 26 | 21 | 11 | 3 |

Source: own processing based on available data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and Michael L. Smith's dataset.

The modus of the size of the municipality with a referendum carried out in the period under review is 305 voters. From this we can conclude that Dahl's assumption is indeed fulfilled, and smaller municipalities are more suitable and popular in terms of implementing local referenda. On the other hand, 35 local referenda per 10,000 voters were implemented in municipalities. Less than a tenth of the total number. Here, therefore, the assumption is fully confirmed. However, if we look at the relationship between the size of the municipality and the participation in the referendum by calculating the Pearson correlation

coefficient, the correlation coefficient takes the value of -0.32, which is a medium correlation and shows that this assumption is not as strong as might be expected.

FIGURE 3: PARTICIPATION IN THE REFERENDUM AND CONCURRENCE WITH THE ELECTIONS




Source: own processing based on available data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and Michael L. Smith's dataset.

A look at the graph showing the relationship between the participation of citizens in the referendum and the coincidence with the elections may seem somewhat surprising. Although we might expect that scheduling a referendum on the same date as an election would lead to a higher turnout, the effect is rather negligible; in the case of the Chamber of Deputies and presidential elections, the increase is on the order of a few percent compared to the average. What is surprising, however, is that in the case of local elections, we can see an average decline in participation in referenda from 12% compared to the overall average participation. We can also say that, in general, the coincidence with the current elections does not have a significant effect on participation in the referendum. Indeed, a more significant fluctuation is only recorded at the municipal level, where, however, cases have been recorded where municipalities used, to put it mildly, strange practices to reduce participation in referenda (Hronová 2014), leading to extreme fluctuations in participation (deviant case) and the average value decreases as well. However, this does not mean that we can unequivocally state that coincidence with local elections is inappropriate for holding a referendum.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

In the Czech Republic, the referendum is an instrument that is becoming part of the widespread practice of political participation. In twenty years, 378 referenda have been held. It is not possible to make value judgements about whether this is a high or low number, or whether it is good or bad. However, we can answer several questions. More than half of the referenda held during the period under review were held in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 eligible voters, and in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 voters, more than 80% of the referenda were held. It can be adequately concluded that smaller municipalities are, indeed,

a more effective platform for such an instrument. Both in terms of impact and in terms of promulgation possibilities. However, this does not necessarily mean that smaller municipalities as a space for implementation always mean a greater chance of success or interest in the referendum. The correlation between the number of voters in a municipality and turnout proved to be moderate and therefore not entirely suitable for stand-alone. Undoubtedly, the nature of the question is also an important factor, with a more significant impact being made by issues that directly affect most of the population in the municipality and have a direct impact on their quality of life, of course mostly in a negative sense. These issues, generally referred to as NIMBY (Not in My Backyard), receive more attention than any other in the Czech Republic, according to research (Nový 2016). Based on this, we can conclude that the success rate of a referendum does not depend directly on the size of the municipality (although they are more common there), but rather on the nature of the question.

In the Czech Republic, almost 72% of all referenda have been carried out in such a way that they were valid and binding. This suggests that referenda are called on issues that have a real impact on the life of the municipality and that calling a referendum today is an activity that is fully professionalised, leading to the setting of conditions that will produce the desired result, which is reflected in both the timing and the wording of the questions.

If we disregard the truly significant and de facto security issues, such as nuclear waste storage facilities or the location of the military base in Brdy, we cannot observe a significant year-on-year increase in the number of referenda held. The number of referenda does not vary significantly even in a year-on-year comparison, usually in the range of 10-20 referenda per year. Therefore, it is not a mass issue, but citizens are not afraid to take advantage of this step. However, of course, the smaller the municipality, the greater the chances of a successful referendum. And the initiators are also familiar with this approach, so that often referenda are held in urban districts rather than in entire cities.

Thus, local referenda are clearly influenced by regional politics and there are very clear patterns of use, as non-binding referenda lead to the non-use of this instrument in the region. Hence, the fact that there are significant differences between the regions, and certainly the acceptance of this instrument, is not unanimous across the regions. Nevertheless, in recent years, a shift towards more effective use can be observed even in these regions (Prague, Liberec Region), where previously referenda ended up being only non-binding. All this rather indicates that in the context of the current debate on the crisis of democratic citizenship and democracy in general in the V4 countries, the instruments of political participation of citizens are becoming established in the Czech Republic.

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# GLAS LJUDSTVA JE GLAS BOGA: LOKALNI REFERENDUMI V ČEŠKI REPUBLIKI 2000–2020

*Pričujoča študija se osredotoča na uporabo instrumenta lokalnega referenduma na Češkem med letoma 2000 in 2020. Ta oblika udeležbe državljanov je postala vedno širše uporabljena pri političnem odločanju. Na podlagi celovitega pregleda referendumov je opravljena analiza porazdelitve referendumov po posameznih regijah, iz katere je jasno razvidno, da se referendumi v nekaterih regijah izvajajo bistveno pogosteje, zlasti v tistih, kjer se pojavljajo specifična vprašanja varnosti ali lokacije jedrske elektrarne. Po predpostavki Roberta Dahla se izkaže, da je največji odstotek referendumov v manjših občinah, kar pa praviloma ne pomeni višje udeležbe. Izkazalo se je, da je pomembnost referendumskega vprašanja velikokrat bolj ključna od drugih dejavnikov. Kombinacija z volitvami se je na primer izkazala kot dejavnik, ki nima velikega vpliva na skupno udeležbo. Razmerje med zavezujočimi in nezavezujočimi referendumi kaže, da se ta instrument uporablja zelo uspešno in učinkovito, tako da je večina izvedenih referendumov zavezujočih in se uporabljajo za obravnavanje vprašanj, ki lahko mobilizirajo državljane.*

**Ključne besede:** referendum; participacija; demokracija; civilna družba; Češka republika.

# HOW ELECTORAL GEOGRAPHY CAN HELP IN STRUGGLE WITH THE FAR RIGHT: EXAMPLE OF SLOVAKIA

**Martin PLEŠIVČÁK**[1]

*Slovakia, as well as other European countries, have recently been facing an increase in populism and support for far-right politics. This is mainly related to the deteriorating socio-economic situation of a part of society to which standard political parties do not respond sufficiently. This creates space for the assertion of radical (especially right-wing) political forces. The article focuses on the issue of far-right support in Slovakia, given the socio-economic situation at the regional (district) level. Several indicators are taken into account - electoral support for the far right, the development of support for the far right, the average wage, the share of people with a university degree and the share of the Roma population. Based on the territorial concentration of these variables, a scale of urgency to solve the problem of support for the far right (risks of escalation of social tension / conflict) is created on a scale from 0-10 points. For this purpose, the so-called Far Right vs. Social Situation (FR-SS) Index linking the above variables was created. It is based on the election results of the far right in the parliamentary elections in 2016 and 2020 and socio-economic data close to the elections in 2020. The results show that Slovakia is relatively significantly differentiated in terms of urgency to address the problem of far right support. Large cities and the west of the country do not perceive this problem so much, on the contrary, the more rural parts, the south of central Slovakia and the northeast of the country are increasingly turning to the support of far-right political parties. The key to solving this problem seems to be the education and improvement of the socio-economic conditions of people living in lagging areas.*

**Key words:** far right; socio-economic conditions; FR-SS Index; districts; Slovakia.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION[2]

The presence of social conflict is a predisposition for the emergence of radical and extremist parties. According to Betz (1993), this conflict has begun to gain strength, especially since the late 1960s. However, Backes and Jesse (1993) state that the origins of these parties can be dated to the first half of the 19th century, as an alternative to standard political parties, especially the conservative and socialist orientations. Their onset in that period also prompted a rise in liberal values (Jaschke 2006). Langenbacher and Schellenberg (2011) point out that although far-right parties have similar content features, they also have a way of communicating with the electorate, but an important moment to understand how they work is an awareness of regional differences within Europe.

The unfavorable socio-economic situation is one of the main reasons for the choice of radical parties (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). The relationship between unemployment, lower education and far-right support has been proven by several studies. e.g. in the case of the German elections in the 1990s (Lubbers and Scheepers 2001), but also of a set of 18 European countries in the following decade (Werts et al. 2012). This relationship is also evident at regional and sub-regional level.

It is traditionally assumed that a high level of economic inequality leads to greater support for the left, as they are the natural guarantors of a policy of redistribution of resources to less wealthy class of society. However, recent studies have shown that economic tensions can lead to support for far-right parties (Aggeborn and Persson 2017). Low-income voters reject left-wing policies such as financial and material support for immigrants, foreign humanitarian and development aid, and environmental protection. In this, they are in line with the offer of far-right parties that focus on supporting social policies with an impact on the local population. Similarly, this relationship may be affected by economic globalization and its effects on the domestic labor market (Malgouyres 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Dippel et al. 2018; Autor et al. 2020). The relationship between income inequality and political polarization has also been demonstrated in the United States (Duca and Saving 2016; McCarty et al. 2016). The inclination of people with lower education, lower socio-economic status and a lower degree of tolerance towards other ethnic and social groups towards authoritarian norms and strong political leaders has been proven by a series of researches. It is these values that are typical of the supply of far-right parties (Adorno et al. 1950; Gabennesch 1972; Mayer and Perrineau 1992; Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Mudde 2007).

The aim of the study is to assess the risk of escalation of social tension at the spatially disaggregated level (at the level of districts of Slovakia), taking into account the electoral behavior of the population and the socio-economic situation at the regional (district) level. We assume that the higher the electoral support of the far-right parties and the less favorable the socio-economic situation within the territory, the higher the risk of social conflict. The information obtained in this way can be valuable for the decision-making sphere, both at the national, regional and local levels, in the fight against growing right-wing radicalism and extremism. The used methodological evaluation procedure

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can be, after appropriate adjustment respecting national and regional specifics, an inspiration for research in other countries as well.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A relatively large number of factors, the significance and weight of which are highly debatable in a given time-space context, play an important role in explaining the support of far-right parties. In principle, however, we can divide them into two basic groups (Eatwell 2003; Norris 2005). In the first, called "demand theory", attention is focused on the existing ethnic structure of the territory, socio-economic conditions, but also the phenomenon of protest voting against standard political parties (Mayer-Perrineau 1992; Lubbers et al. 2002). On the other hand, there is a supply-side theory emphasizing factors such as the shape of the party system, the personalities and leaders of political parties, and the role of the media (Golder 2003). In both cases, however, there is no unity within the academic community to the extent of the importance of individual factors. The issue of migration and thus the change in the ethnic structure of the territory is considered by one group of scientists to be very important in assessing the causes of support for far-right parties (Anderson 1996; Martin 1996; Knigge 1998), while other authors evaluate its impact as very limited (Mayer-Perrineau 1989; Givens 2000). The same applies to factors such as unemployment (Lewis-Beck and Mitchell 1993; Jackman and Volpert 1996; Knigge 1998) and the quorum for parliamentary input (Swank and Betz 1995; Jackman and Volpert 1996). Another related topic is the weight of the issue of Euroscepticism in national elections and its impact on the electoral support of far-right parties (Conti and Memoli 2011; Hartleb 2012), which tend to benefit from global issues (crisis - financial, economic, migration, COVID-19, security - war in Ukraine, energy, food, etc.), which have a different effect from territory to territory and undermine the belief that we are only able to manage these crises through joint action, within joint transnational groupings (EU, NATO, etc.) The problems of the informative value of such oriented studies are also in their methodological background (e.g. selection and compilation of explanatory factors), or the way of interpreting the achieved results (Golder 2003).

Previous research on far-right parties in Western European countries has confirmed that socio-economic conditions are a factor that significantly influences the electoral support of these parties. Far-right parties are expected to gain support, especially from people who are socio-economically marginalized, due to changes related to globalization processes and deindustrialization (Betz 1994). The same effect is observed in times of socio-economic decline (rising unemployment, falling real wages) or immigration crises (Zimmermann 2003; Csanyi 2020). Income inequality is another factor that affects the support of far-right parties. However, there is no consensus on how. E.g. Coffé et al. (2007) argue that growing income inequality reduces support for far-right parties, with some of their electorate (less wealthy) tending to support left-wing parties as natural guarantors of the rights and interests of the working and poorer social classes. The opposite view is represented by Jesuit et al. (2009), who declare that income inequality is reflected in the growing support of far-right parties as psychological distance (diversity) grows between different sections of the population, undermining their mutual social trust and social capital (Putnam 1993; Knack 2002; Uslaner 2002; Uslaner and Brown 2005; Shayo 2009), thus strengthening the chances of success for authoritarian forces, including the far-right ones. The weakening of social trust between social groups (also based on

the growth of income disparities) reduces the degree of tolerance for other groups in society, including respect for the principles of equality, minority rights and the rights of other groups in society (Andersen and Fetner 2008). However, this also applies to the relationship solely on the basis of economic differences (rich vs. poor), which is confirmed by several authors (Fukuyama 1995; Uslaner, 2002). This in turn leads to an increase in the popularity of far-right parties (Mudde 2007).

Together with the social class factor, another important element influencing the electoral behavior of the population is the level of education (Lipset 1981) and the degree of tolerance towards other ethnic groups, or social minorities. The issue of the choice of far-right parties in the context of education level has become a relatively frequent topic in recent decades (Betz 1993; Lubbers et al. 2002; Norris 2005; Kitschelt 2007; Rydgren 2007; Ivarsflaten and Stubager 2013). People with lower education have been shown to make up the bulk of the far-right electorate (e.g. Lubbers et al. 2002; Kessler and Freeman 2005; Ford and Goodwin 2010; Werts et al. 2012; Ivarsflaten and Stubager 2013; Savelkoul and Scheepers 2017). However, some studies question such claims (Evans 2005; Norris 2005; Arzheimer and Carter 2006). Nevertheless, most studies agree that the higher a person's education, the less likely they are to choose an far-right party (Ford and Goodwin 2010; Ivarsflaten and Stubager 2013; Van Gent et al. 2014). It has also been found that the growth in income disparities is changing the structure of the far-right electorate, in favor of those with less education and lower incomes, and to the detriment of more educated, better-earning far-right voters. The lower and middle class people choose far-right parties not only for material reasons, but also in terms of ideological principles. They feel that they are the victims of the negative effects of globalization. Therefore, they form a protest against the socialist and left-wing parties, which, in their view, have failed to protect economically more vulnerable groups and are thus directly responsible for increasing socio-economic disparities within society (Betz 1994). The level of education of people in low-income jobs plays a key role in supporting far-right parties (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007), including the degree of tolerance for people who profess other values, resp. originating from another cultural background (Kitschelt 1995). On the other hand, people in management positions, or performing jobs with a higher degree of autonomy, thanks to their higher education they are able to accept a cosmopolitan view of society (Kitschelt 1994). Roemer (2001) argues that the transition of voters (e.g. also left-wing parties) to far-right parties can be explained by the growing importance of non-economic, socio-cultural issues (e.g. immigration and national identity at the expense of socio-economic issues such as tax policy, etc.). This change tends to be more pronounced as socio-economic (income) disparities increase (Han 2016).

Dorn et al. (2020) in their study showed that economic conditions have a significant impact on the support of extremist parties, even in a regional context. The lower the economic level of the region, and the higher the level of inequality and poverty in it, the greater the support of the far-right, or left-wing parties, with this effect being stronger in the case of support for far-right parties.

Within the Central European area, the issue of radicalism, extremism and support of far-right parties has also recently begun to receive increasing attention (Minkenberg 2002; Kopeček 2007; Mareš 2009; Mikuš and Gurňák 2012; Kluknavská 2012, 2013 and 2015; Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov 2015; Kluknavská and Smolík 2016; Mikuš and Gurňák 2016; Mikuš et al. 2016; Vasiľková and

Androvičová 2019; Kevický 2021). Later, attention was also paid to the comparison between Western and Eastern part of the Europe (Polyakova 2015).

In the case of Slovakia, the issue of radicalism and extremism, both social and political, has recently been addressed by several authors (e.g. Štefančík 2013; Murínová 2017; Lichner et al. 2018; Štefančík and Stradiotová 2021). Authors from the neighboring Czech Republic also state that the growth of social problems in the form of unemployment or poverty leads to greater support for radicalism and extremism (Marešová et al. 1999). The impact of the economic recession on the electoral behavior of the population and its inclination towards the far right, especially from the economically most affected regions in Slovakia, have been confirmed by studies by several authors (Kluknavská 2013; Kluknavská and Smolík 2016). The phenomenon of (not only) economic migration and the consequent ethnic mixture of the territory has a similar impact, which can lead to xenophobic and extremist sentiments in society and the subsequent support of radical parties (Vašečka 2009). The very presence of the Roma ethnic group is an important factor in the geographical distribution of support for far-right parties (Mikuš and Gurňák 2012; Mikuš and Gurňák 2016; Buček and Plešivčák 2017), e.g. just Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS, eng. *People's Party Our Slovakia*). Minkenberg (2002) and Kluknavská (2015) speak of "internal outsiders" as one of the key factors determining the emergence of far-right parties in Central Europe.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the paper responds to its main goal, which is to quantify the risk of escalation of social tensions arising from political radicalization and adverse socio-economic conditions at the level of districts of Slovakia (79 districts in total, Table 1). Five key factors (variables) are included in the overall assessment:

- political radicalism, measured by the *electoral support of the far right*, in % (election result of ĽSNS in the parliamentary elections 2020) (Elections and referenda 2022, data for 2020)
- development of political radicalism, measured by the *development of electoral support of the far right*, in % (election result of ĽSNS in the parliamentary elections 2016 and 2020 - growth index) (Elections and referenda 2022, data for 2016 and 2020)
- economic situation, measured by the *average wage*, in EUR (DATAcube 2022, data for 2020)
- educational situation, measured by the share of *university-educated population*, in % (Census 2021)
- ethnic situation, measured by the share of the *Roma population*, in % (DATAcube 2022, data for 2020).[3]

[3] The indicator of the share of the Roma population was chosen because the rhetoric of far-right forces in Slovakia has deviated in the last decade from the topic of Slovak-Hungarian relations (including the scope of civil rights of Hungarians living in Slovakia) and recently in the context of 2015 migration crisis, focuses exclusively on Roma issues and anti-immigration policy. Given the very low number of processed asylum applications or temporary asylum (de facto until the outbreak of the new migration crisis due to the war in Ukraine at the end of February 2022), the share of the Roma population is therefore a key indicator from this point of view. However, statistics on the number of Roma are inaccurate. It is estimated that only one in six, or seven Roma (according to Census 2021, 67,000 people did so). However, according to the Atlas of Roma Communities 2019 (2021), there are about 450,000 of them living in Slovakia. However, this does not change the fact that the results of the census, resp. DATAcube data can capture relatively

In order to make the individual input factors comparable, we converted their values to a standardized form - for each of the five indicators, we calculated % value for the given district in relation to the median at the district level (of 79 districts is the value for the 40th district in order). In each of the five areas, every district was able to gain from 0-2 negative points, for a maximum of 10 in total.

- political radicalism, measured by the *electoral support of the far right*, in % (election result of ĽSNS in the parliamentary elections 2020)
- if value 100-110% to median = high support (1 point), > 110% = very high support (2 points)
- development of political radicalism, measured by the *development of electoral support of the far right,* in % (election result of ĽSNS in the parliamentary elections 2016 and 2020 - growth index)
- if value 100-110% to median = slight increase (1 point), > 110% = significant increase (2 points)
- economic situation, measured by the *average wage*, in EUR
- if value 90-100% to median = unfourable (1 point), < 90% = very unfourable (2 points)
- educational situation, measured by the share of *university-educated population*, in %
- if value 90-100% to median = unfourable (1 point), < 90% = very unfourable (2 points)
- ethnic situation, measured by the share of the *Roma population*, in %
- if value 100-110% to median = unfourable (1 point), > 110% = very unfourable (2 points)

**Problem of the Far Right - Scale**
*Degree of urgency*
0-2 points = very low
3-4 points = low
5-6 points = medium
7-8 points = high
9-10 points = very high

In the second phase of the research, we distinguish between those territorial units (districts) that have achieved the same number of points on the scale of the urgency to solve the problem of the far right (risks of escalation of social tension). For this purpose, we created so-called the *FR-SS (Far Right vs. Social Situation) Index*. In its construction, we assume that the support of the far right and the social situation are interrelated (the less favorable the social situation, the higher the electoral support for the far right parties). The FR-SS Index evaluates the election result of the far right (fr) in the context of the social situation of a given territorial unit, represented by factors of economic level (w), education (ue) and ethnicity (presence of a socially excluded ethnic group, R).

Its mathematical formula is then as follows:

$$\text{FR-SS Index} = \frac{fr\,.frd}{\text{w}\,.\text{ue}\,.\text{nR}}$$

fr = far right party election result (% of national median value)
frd = development of the far right party election result (% of national median value)
w = average wage (% of national median value)

accurately the existing interregional differences in the spatial distribution of the Roma, albeit at an order of magnitude lower level.

ue = university educated population, of 18+ aged population (% of national median value)
nR = non-Roma population, of total population (% of national median value)[4]

The FR-SS Index thus expresses the ratio between the electoral support of the far right and the social situation measured by the average wage, the share of the university-educated adult population and the share of the non-Roma population in a given territorial unit, given the median value at the district level.

The higher the value of the index is above the limit 1, the more significant the ratio of both variables in the given territorial unit is in favor of the far-right support indicator - the high value of the index is caused by a mutual combination of relatively high far-right support and relatively unfavorable social situation, either extremely high support of the far right, or extremely unfavorable social situation. The value of the index close to the limit of 1 means that in a given territorial unit the support of the far right is at a similar level as the state of the social situation, with respect to the national median value.

The lower the value of the index is below 1, the more significant the ratio of both variables in the given territorial unit is in favor of the indicator of the social situation - the low value of the index is caused by a mutual combination of relatively low support of the far right and relatively favorable social situation, either extremely low support of the far right, or extremely favorable social situation. As already mentioned, variables entering into the calculation of the index for a given territorial unit are, in terms of the correctness of their mutual comparison and ultimately the final informative value of the analysis, expressed in % of the national median value (converted to the relativized form).

TABLE 1: DISTRICTS OF SLOVAKIA AND THEIR ABBREVIATIONS

| **Bratislava region** | | **Trnava region** | | **Trenčín region** | | **Nitra region** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. |
| Bratislava 1 | BA 1 | Dunajská Streda | DS | Bánovce nad Bebravou | BN | Komárno | KN |
| Bratislava 2 | BA 2 | Galanta | GA | Ilava | IL | Levice | LV |
| Bratislava 3 | BA 3 | Hlohovec | HC | Myjava | MY | Nitra | NR |
| Bratislava 4 | BA 4 | Piešťany | PE | Nové Mesto nad Váhom | NM | Nové Zámky | NZ |
| Bratislava 5 | BA 5 | Senica | SE | Partizánske | PE | Šaľa | SA |
| Malacky | MA | Skalica | SI | Považská Bystrica | PB | Topoľčany | TO |
| Pezinok | PK | Trnava | TT | Prievidza | PD | Zlaté Moravce | ZM |
| Senec | SC | | | Púchov | PU | | |
| | | | | Trenčín | TN | | |
| **Žilina region** | | **Banská Bystrica region** | | **Prešov region** | | **Košice region** | |
| District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. | District | Abbr. |
| Bytča | BY | Banská Bystrica | BB | Bardejov | BJ | Gelnica | GL |
| Čadca | CA | Banská Štiavnica | BS | Humenné | HE | Košice 1 | KE 1 |
| Dolný Kubín | DK | Brezno | BR | Kežmarok | KK | Košice 2 | KE 2 |
| Kysucké Nové Mesto | KM | Detva | DT | Levoča | LE | Košice 3 | KE 3 |
| Liptovský Mikuláš | LM | Krupina | KA | Medzilaborce | ML | Košice 4 | KE 4 |
| Martin | MT | Lučenec | LC | Poprad | PP | Košice - okolie | KS |
| Námestovo | NO | Poltár | PT | Prešov | PO | Michalovce | MI |
| Ružomberok | RK | Revúca | RA | Sabinov | SB | Rožňava | RV |
| Turčianske Teplice | TR | Rimavská Sobota | RS | Snina | SV | Sobrance | SO |
| Tvrdošín | TS | Veľký Krtíš | VK | Stará Ľubovňa | SL | Spišská Nová Ves | SN |
| Žilina | ZA | Zvolen | ZV | Stropkov | SP | Trebišov | TV |
| | | Žarnovica | ZC | Svidník | SK | | |
| | | Žiar nad Hronom | ZH | Vranov nad Topľou | VT | | |

Source: DATAcube (2022).

[4] Given the existence of a direct relationship between the level of far-right electoral support (in the numerator's formula) and the presence of the Roma population (in the denominator's formula), as well as respecting the orientation of the other two factors on the denominator, we have to include the value representing the proportion of the *non-Roma population*.

## 4 RESULTS

Applying the above methodological framework, we came to the conclusion that the extent of far-right support is most problematic in the districts of Gelnica, Poltár and Rimavská Sobota (districts on the Figure 1 marked by red colour), i.e. in districts located in the long-term socio-economically deprived south of the central Slovakia (Banská Bystrica Region), and in the east of the country. On the scale reflecting accuteness of the solution to the problem of the far right, they achieved from the 10-point scale 9, or even 10 points (Gelnica from the Košice region). Here we can see that the conditions for the support of far-right ideology are really very suitable and the risk of escalation of social tensions is very high. These districts are characterized by very high electoral support of the ĽSNS party (parliamentary elections 2020), which, moreover, has risen quite sharply over time (compared the parliamentary elections 2016 and 2020). In addition, the socio-economic situation in these parts of Slovakia is very unfavorable. There is a very low average wage, a significantly unfavorable educational level of the population and a high concentration of the Roma population. This mixture of negative factors means a high risk of escalating social tensions in these areas in the near or distant future.

The situation is far from ideal in other districts of Slovakia, on the Figure 1 marked in orange (group of 13 districts). These territories gained on the scale of urgency of solving the problem of the far right 7, or 8 points, which means a high risk of escalation of social tension. Again, these are districts located mainly in the south of central Slovakia (Krupina, Veľký Krtíš, Detva and Lučenec), or in the northeast of the country (Sobrance, Medzilaborce, Sabinov, Vranov nad Topľou, Stará Ľubovňa and Kežmarok). From this point of view, the Banská Bystrica and Prešov regions are the most problematic. Again, it is a synergy of factors of high electoral support of the far right, unfavorable socio-economic situation and territorial concentration of the Roma population. They are complemented by selected districts from the northwest (Čadca and Turčianske Teplice), and southwest of Slovakia (Komárno). In the first two mentioned districts, the spatial concentration of the Roma population does not play a significant role, as its share is very low in these parts of Slovakia. In these districts, far-right electoral support is based on historically entrenched patterns of local electoral behavior tending to nationalist (nationally oriented) political entities (formerly Hlinkova Slovenská ľudová strana – HSĽS, eng. *Hlinka's Slovak People's Party*, later Slovenská národná strana – SNS, eng. *Slovak National Party*), but to some extent also on the relatively less favorable social situation of the population. This part of Slovakia (northwest) is also characterized by an inclination to the values of etatism or the feeling of "fear of the unknown" (e.g. in relation to the "non-existent" Roma minority). The district of Komárno, located in the southwest of Slovakia, is characterized by a high concentration of people of Hungarian nationality. Although the support of the far-right ĽSNS is only at the level of approximately 1/3 of the median value of Slovakia, its support increased from 2% to 3% between 2016 and 2020. In addition, the social situation in this district is also not very ideal (wages at the level of about 90% of the median, the share of the university educated population even only at the level of about 82.5% of the median). However, the FR-SS Index for this district is very low, which de facto minimizes concerns about the expansion of far-right support in this area (also given the high proportion of the population other than the Roma national minority - Hungarian).

Another group of territorial units consists of 14 districts (districts on the Figure 1 marked by yellow colour). Here, however, the risk of social tensions arising

from the socio-economic situation and political preferences of the population can only be described as medium. These districts form more concentrated units, especially in the western part of Slovakia in Horná Nitra (Partizánske, Bánovce nad Bebravou, Prievidza and Topoľčany) continuing to the southeast (Žarnovica, Banská Štiavnica) and a group of districts on the border of Banská Bystrica region (Brezno, Revúca), Košice region (Rožňava, Spišská Nové Ves) and the Prešov region (Levoča). These are completed by the districts of Trebišov (Košice region), Bytča (Žilina region) and Snina (Prešov region). They are also more diverse in terms of socio-economic situation than the two previous groups. Only the districts of Revúca, Spišská Nové Ves, Banská Štiavnica and Levoča received a higher grade (6 points) from this group.

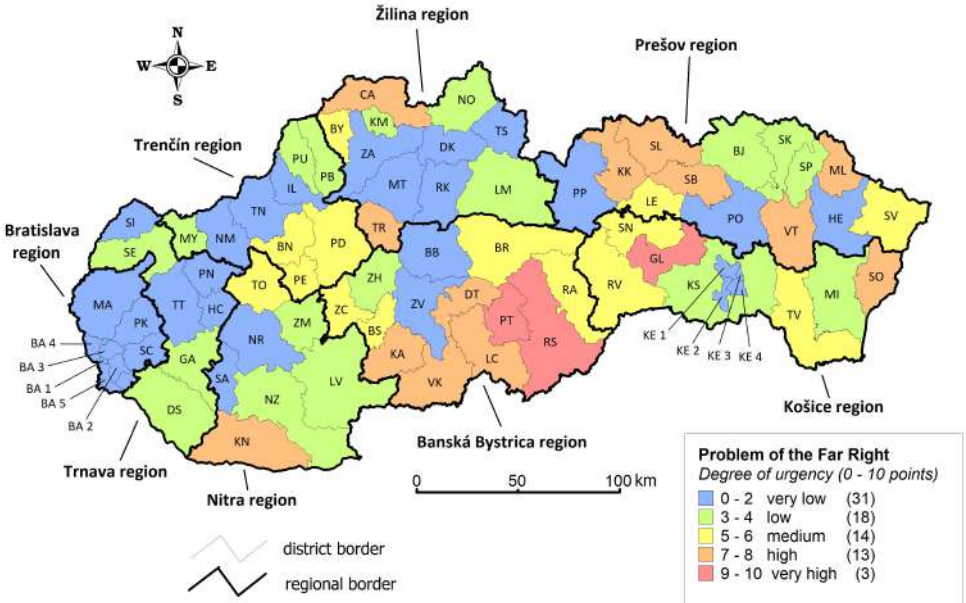
In another group of territorial units, we can state a low risk of escalation of social tension, given the economic situation, social conditions and electoral preferences. It consists of 18 districts, and from a spatial point of view it is a very variable group, represented in all regions of Slovakia (see districts on the Figure 1 marked in green). However, only one district (Žiar nad Hronom) is located in the Banská Bystrica region. Within this group, the situation is most favorable in the districts of Galanta, Senica (both Trnava region in the southwest of Slovakia), Myjava (Trenčín region in the west of the country), Levice (Nitra region in the southwest), Košice - okolie, Svidník, Stropkov (both Prešov region) and Žiar nad Hronom, in which the mentioned risk represents the value of 3 points out of 10.

The last, most numerous group of districts (31 out of a total of 79 districts in Slovakia, marked in blue on the Figure 1) is characterized by a very low risk of social conflict based on electoral preferences and the existing socio-economic situation. Their spatial concentration is tied to those parts of Slovakia that are most economically and transport infrstructure developed (northeast direction from Bratislava via Považie to Žilina and further east to the Tatras region), or represent a large urban center of a given part of Slovakia (districts of all regional centres, or other large cities, e.g. Zvolen and Humenné, within lagging regions). These are the parts of Slovakia that are the best in terms of living standards. These districts received 0-2 negative points out of a total of 10 possible. The very lowest acuteness of the solution of the far right support (0 points) in terms of possible socio-economic conflict was identified in the districts of Nové Mesto nad Váhom, Malacky, Nitra, Žilina, Trnava, Trenčín, Banská Bystrica, Pezinok, Dolný Kubín, Košice 4, Senec and districts of Bratislava 5, 4 and 2. These are predominantly districts from the western part of Slovakia, or districts of the largest cities in the country. In their case, the share of ĽSNS support is significantly below average, over time it has even decreased significantly in relative terms, and they are very favorable economically, as well as in terms of the educational level of the population. The share of the Roma population is very low in their case.

As already mentioned in the methodology, the FR-SS Index (Figure 2) was used in order to determine the specific order of districts with the same score within a given category (group) of districts. It declares that the problem of far-right support needs to be addressed especially in the districts of Gelnica, Poltár, Krupina, Rimavská Sobota, Revúca, Čadca, Medzilaborce and Veľký Krtíš (all had a FR-SS Index value higher than 2, the darkest red on the Figure 2. Up to 5 of them are located in the south of the Banská Bystrica region. In contrast, the FR-SS Index was below 0.5 in the case of 18 districts (on the Figure 2 the shade of the lightest red). Half of them are the city districts of Bratislava and Košice, and the rest are

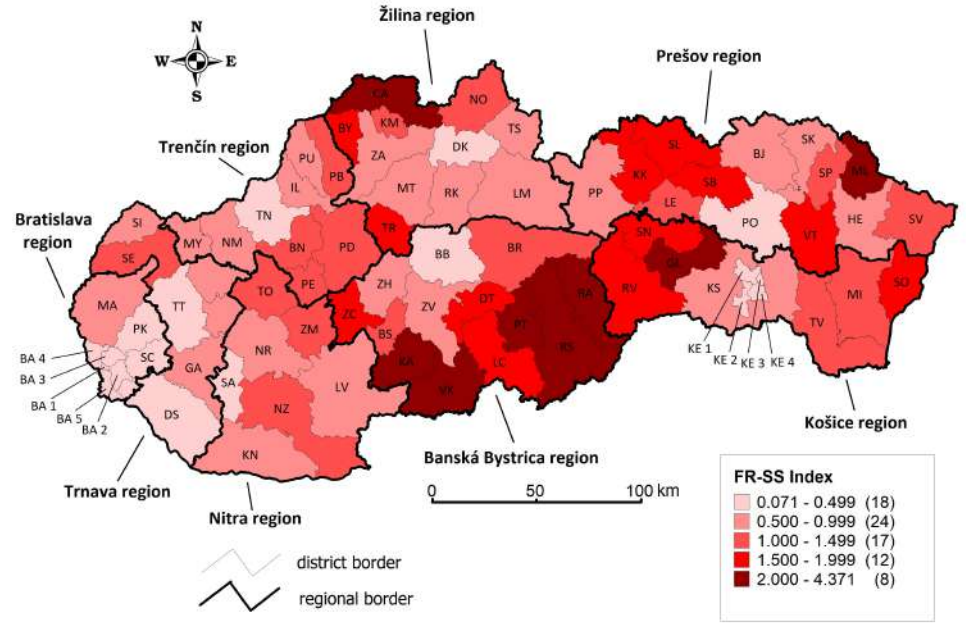
the districts of Dunajská Streda, Senec, Dolný Kubín, Pezinok, Banská Bystrica, Šaľa, Prešov, Trenčín and Trnava.

FIGURE 1: PROBLEM OF THE FAR RIGHT AT DISTRICT LEVEL IN SLOVAKIA IN 2020




Source: Census (2021); DATAcube (2022): Elections and Referenda (2022).

FIGURE 2: FR-SS INDEX AT DISTRICT LEVEL IN SLOVAKIA IN 2020




Source: Census (2021); DATAcube (2022): Elections and Referenda (2022).

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The regional and local context of far-right support cannot be underestimated. The connection between political radicalism and the poor socio-economic situation at the regional and district levels was addressed by Dorn et al. (2020). The authors state that the lower the economic performance of a given territory (district), the higher the share of votes in elections, whether for the far right or

left-wing entities. The authors conclude that the growth of economic inequality leads to political instability and the choice of non-standard, more radical parties. Social cohesion is weakening, extremist and populist parties are strengthening, leading to social and political polarization. Large negative macroeconomic events can have various political manifestations - demand for redistribution of resources (Brunner et al. 2011; Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014), re-election of government parties (Lewis-Beck and Stegmeier 2000), but also support for populist and extremist parties (de Bromhead et al. 2013; Mian et al. 2014; Funke et al. 2016).

When evaluating the issue of electoral support of far-right parties in post-socialist countries, it is necessary to take into account various social, political, historical as well as geographical contexts (e.g. Nociar 2012; Kluknavská 2013; Kluknavská and Smolík 2016; Mikuš et al. 2016; Bahna and Zagrapan 2017). According to Vasiľková and Androvičová (2019), the key to overcoming this threat is education, improving socio-economic conditions and the fight against corruption. Territorial context of support for the far right in Slovakia, as well as the explanatory factors, were discussed by geographers such as Mikuš and Gurňák (2012 and 2016), Mikuš et al. (2016), Buček and Plešivčák (2017) and Kevický (2021), and this approach certainly needs to be further developed.

The limiting aspect of the study is the fact that we did not assess the risk of smaller territorial concentrations of the monitored variables (e.g. Roma population, but also other evaluated socio-economic characteristics) within the districts, or within large cities that are part of them. Nevertheless, it can be stated that in rural districts with a high absolute and relative territorial concentration of the risk factor (e.g. low wages, low share of university educated population, high share of Roma population) the risk of escalation of social tensions is much higher than in districts, or in large cities with a relatively low level of risk factors.

We can state that in districts with a high FR-SS Index, the unfavorable social situation is a breeding ground for the support of far-right political entities, and that are these territorial units that should be assisted by public authorities (central, regional and local government) and third sector focus, e.g. in the form of implementing effective strategies to combat growing political extremism stemming from social tensions, together with the implementation of action plans to improve the standard of living, education and coexistence of the various social groups living in the area. On the contrary, in districts with a low FR-SS Index, the social situation is not a predisposition for the growth of support for far-right political entities. However, even in this group of districts, it is possible to identify territorial units on which the help of public actors should be focused, as several of them have a problem with a long-term, historically given inclination to support the far right.

The present study can be an inspiration for other countries that want to apply a regionally oriented approach in the fight against the far right. Addressing this issue will certainly gain more and more relevance and urgency, as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy and food crisis and the oncoming stagflation will almost certainly exacerbate the socio-economic disparities between the various social groups.

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# KAKO LAHKO VOLILNA GEOGRAFIJA POMAGA V BOJU S SKRAJNO DESNICO: PRIMER SLOVAŠKE

*Slovaška in tudi druge evropske države se v zadnjem času soočajo z naraščanjem populizma in podpore skrajno desničarski politiki. To je povezano predvsem s slabšanjem socialno-ekonomskega položaja dela družbe, na katerega se standardne politične stranke ne odzivajo dovolj. Slednje ustvarja prostor za uveljavitev radikalnih (predvsem desnih) političnih sil. Članek se osredotoča na vprašanje podpore skrajni desnici na Slovaškem glede na socialno-ekonomske razmere na regionalni (okrožni) ravni. Upoštevanih je več indikatorjev - volilna podpora skrajni desnici, razvoj podpore skrajni desnici, povprečna plača, delež visokošolsko izobraženih in delež romske populacije. Na podlagi teritorialne koncentracije teh spremenljivk je oblikovana lestvica nujnosti reševanja problema podpore skrajni desnici (tveganja stopnjevanja družbenih napetosti/konflikta) na lestvici od 0 do 10 točk. V ta namen je bil ustvarjen tako imenovani Indeks skrajna desnica proti socialni položaj (FR-SS), ki povezuje zgornje spremenljivke in temelji na volilnih rezultatih skrajne desnice na parlamentarnih volitvah leta 2016 in 2020 ter socialno-ekonomskih podatkih v času volitev leta 2020. Rezultati kažejo, da je Slovaška razmeroma močno diferencirana glede nujnosti reševanja problema podpore skrajni desnici. Velika mesta in zahod države tega problema ne zaznavajo toliko; nasprotno pa se bolj ruralni deli - jug osrednje Slovaške in severovzhod države - vse bolj obračajo k podpori skrajno desnih političnih strank. Zdi se, da je ključ do rešitve tega problema izobraževanje in izboljšanje socialno-ekonomskih razmer ljudi, ki živijo v zaostalih območjih.*

**Ključne besede:** skrajna desnica; socialno-ekonomske razmere; indeks skrajna desnica proti socialni položaj (FR-SS indeks); okrožja; Slovaška.

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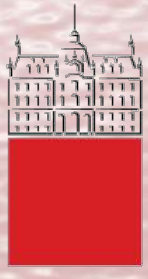

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