

SELECTION OF PUBLIC POLICY ACTORS AT THE LEVEL OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

VÝBER AKTÉROV VEREJNEJ POLITIKY NA ÚROVNI MIESTNEJ SAMOSPRÁVY

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Abstract

Territorial self-government has a significant place in the political system of the Slovak Republic. This fact is confirmed by its emplacement in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. An inseparable part of self-government are the actors who shape it through their daily activities, most often by their governance in the public interest. This presented paper deals with the issue of local self-government in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, with an emphasis on the selection of its key actors. While expressing our considerations we identify with the assumption that local self-government is a space for political participation of its inhabitants, and in many ways can serve as a model of public administration for actors of public policy at higher levels of the state as well. Due to this reason, our ambition is to provide comprehensive information about the method of selection of directly elected representatives of the local self-government and to conduct critical reflections on the current conditions of this selection.

Keywords

Self-government, actors of public policy, democracy, decentralization

INTRODUCTION

Elections represent one of the key elements of a democratic political system. They serve mostly as an instrument of legitimacy of power. The general public most often associates elections and the electoral process with top politics and the selection of representatives of national interests. However, elections and the electoral process have a deeper meaning.

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Hence, these manifestations of democracy are much closer to the members of society than it may seem. For this reason, we not only deal with the issue of elections and the electoral process in general in this presented paper, but we also try to introduce the reader to the sphere of territorial self-government in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. Despite the fact that this paper is theoretical in its nature, we draw your attention to some facts resulting from the applied practice. In the real day-to-day life of local governments many situations emerge, which are not anticipated by the legislator, or even cannot be anticipated for different (legislative) reasons. Although we deal with the formal conditions of the selection of public policy actors at the level of local self-government in the Slovak self-governing sphere in this paper, we consider it important to inform about real and potential negative experiences within the setting of democratic public governance at the local level from the point of view of selecting its key actors. Territorial self-government is a sphere which can teach us democratic norms and rules, as well as be a model for contemporary top politics in many ways.

Current level of knowledge

In general, the term "elections" is associated with the possibility of choice based on a free decision between several agendas or personal alternatives. The basic condition for the term reflected in such way is the fact that it is a competitive election. It means that a free decision is made based on the existence of free competition between existing alternatives. We can identify two key principles in competitive elections. On the one hand, it is an equal participation of all members of the society, and on the other hand, the free competition of various schools of thought and persons in the contest to occupy leading positions in the country (Vetter, Remer-Bollow, 2016).

Regarding to the above, it can be concluded that free elections – or choice between existing alternatives itself, represent necessary prerequisite for democracy. Nevertheless, the institute of elections also appears in the case of political regimes that are not considered democratic. In these cases, however, elections fulfil a diametrically different function. Schedler (2015) uses the term electoral authoritarianism in this context. It refers to those political regimes in which free competitive elections are formally guaranteed, but in practical terms there is no real political competition between alternatives. In this context, "free, competitive" elections are only a tool for formal authorization of the existing power. The pair of authors Steven Lewitski and Lucan A. Way (2010) use a similar term, competitive authoritarianism. They describe it as a form of political leadership in which elections are regularly repeated, they are perceived as an important tool for achieving power, but at the same time, the resources of the country are used by the current representatives of power as a means of achieving an advantage in the electoral process. Simply put, the space for possible alternatives is significantly reduced in favour of the current holder of power. In general, it can be stated that democracy without competitive elections is impossible, but it is necessary to keep in mind that free competitive elections are "only" one of the principles of democracy.

Results and discussion

Elections to local self-government bodies aim to fill two types of self-government bodies. One is monocratic – the municipality mayor, and the other one is collective – the municipal council, composed of its members. Both mayors and members of the municipal council are elected for 4 years. A specific feature of these elections is that it is not a single election, but hundreds and thousands of separate elections, with same date and same rules (Tokarský, 2010). At this point, it should be noted that due to the character of the residential structure of the Slovak Republic, each municipality and city represents a unique political space. From a formal point of view, the same rules apply to them (relatively), but despite this, the results of political decisions are in many cases diametrically different. Just as a reminder, during the periods of the state's independence, elections of this kind were held in our domestic conditions for a total of eight times (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022). In addition to these regular elections, we also saw a higher number of repeated or additional elections during this period. A fairly frequent reason was the declaration of regular elections as invalid in some self-governing units. Additional elections were held in the case of mayor's resignation, or in the case when no eligible residents expressed the interest in public positions before regular elections.² Due to the fact that municipal elections involve the filling of two diametrically different municipal bodies, it is necessary to distinguish individual elections also from the point of view of individual electoral districts. During municipal elections, several electoral districts are established to fill the positions in municipal council and the seat of mayor. In addition to the fact that the territory of the Slovak Republic is divided into individual districts, whose borders are identical to the borders of the given municipality or city, the territory of the municipality or city itself is divided into several districts as well – with precisely determined number of council members, who are about to be elected in the relevant district.

2 In the last municipal and at the same time regional elections, which were held on 29.10.2022, elections were not held in the following municipalities: Ratkovo, Michalková, Brezovec, Pongráčovce, Jakušovce. In the municipalities of Domadice, Moškovec, Harakovce, Šarišské Bohdanovce, Starina, Dobroslava, none of the residents expressed interest in the office of mayor. Thus, voters were electing only the members of the municipal council. It is also worth mentioning that in twenty-five municipalities, the list of candidates was lower than the required number of elected members of municipal councils (Studienka, Doľany, Prašník, Slatinka nad Bebravou, Rudnianska Lehota, Sebedražie, Čab, Chrabrany, Lužany, Blažovce, Jazernica, Karlová, Žabokreky, Lietavská Svinná - Babkov, Baláže, Poniky, Petrovce, Lukavica, Slatinské Lazy, Nevolné, Harakovce, Lažany, Dobroslava, Čižatice, Hrhov.) New elections should be held in the above-mentioned municipalities later. In case the municipalities fail to "gather" a sufficient number of candidates for public positions, these municipalities are declared as non-functional. The government can annex such municipality to another municipality, but only with its consent. Such a procedure is undoubtedly a step forward and can be seen as an ambition to solve an undesirable situation, but on a practical level it can bring more problems. Igor Palúš (2020) deals with this issue in more detail within his scientific paper entitled *Dysfunctional Municipality – Progress or Further Problems?*

up to 40 inhabitants of the municipality 3 members; from 41 to 500 inhabitants of the municipality 3 to 5 members; from 501 to 1,000 inhabitants of the municipality 5 to 7 members; from 1,001 to 3,000 inhabitants of the municipality 7 to 9 members; from 3,001 to 5,000 inhabitants of the municipality 9 to 11 members; from 5,001 to 10,000 inhabitants of the municipality 11 to 13 members; from 10,001 to 20,000 inhabitants of the municipality 13 to 19 members; from 20,001 to 50,000 inhabitants of the municipality 15 to 25 members; from 50,001 to 100,000 inhabitants of the municipality 19 to 31 members; over 100,000 inhabitants of the municipality 23 to 41 members.

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In the case of electing a mayor, the electoral district is inherently single-mandated, because a monocratic body is being elected. A different set of electoral districts can be found in the case of electing the municipal council members. In this case, several multi-mandate electoral districts are created in most instances. The law does not specify exactly into how many electoral districts the territory of the municipality should be divided, nor the exact number of mandates to be elected within them. Act no. 180/2014 Coll. on the conditions for exercising the right to vote establishes the highest number of elected council members per electoral district. According to this law, a maximum of 12 municipal council members can be elected in one electoral district. Electoral districts are created by the municipal council itself, within the framework of legal rules. Likewise, the municipal council has a relatively high degree of independence in determining the total number of municipal council members to be elected in the upcoming elections. The number of members is linked to the number of inhabitants of the municipality and Act no. 369/1990 Coll. on municipal establishment determines the minimal and maximal number of the municipal council members, depending on the number of inhabitants of the self-governing unit.

Marek Domin (2017) points out that during the creation of electoral districts, the municipal council should respect the principle of equal right to vote. In practical terms, this means that the municipal council, when determining the number of electoral districts, should ensure the possibility to equally influence the outcome of the elections for all residents. The aim of this assumption is that there should not be a significant disparity between the number of votes needed to fill the mandate within the electoral districts in the same municipality. Practical experiences in this area indicate that multi-mandate electoral districts are a common part of Slovak cities and municipalities. Nevertheless, there are two exceptions, when the elections of members of the municipal council are held in single-mandate electoral districts. The law allows the municipal council to create one or more single-mandate electoral districts for the purpose of elections. This principle is relatively often applied in city districts where there is only one member of the city council per the number of inhabitants. Another variant is the creation of a single multi-mandate electoral district, where all members of the municipal council will be elected.

Undoubtedly, one of the important aspects of elections at the local level is the institute of active and passive right to vote. The Constitution of the Slovak Republic grants the right to vote in the municipal elections to a resident who has a permanent residence in the territory of the given municipality or city. This right is also granted to other nationalities and foreigners, who have a permanent residence permit. At this point it should be noted that active and passive voting rights are not linked exclusively to state citizenship in this case. Thus, it is possible to generalize two key conditions necessary for the exercise of active electoral rights in the area of local communities:

- (1) permanent residence in the relevant municipality;
- (2) be at least 18 years old on the day of the election (Machyniak, 2020).

As in the previous case, the basic law of the state does not specify the conditions for the exercise of the passive right to vote in the case of elections to municipal self-government bodies. Act no. 180/2014 Coll. on the conditions of the exercise of the right to vote, however, pays considerable attention to this issue. It identifies the passive right to vote in relation to a collective body and in relation to a monocratic body of local self-government.

In the case of electing the municipal council members, the opportunity to run for office is available for foreigners as well – if they have a permanent residence in the given municipality. Candidates who seek to obtain a mandate in the representative body must again meet two key conditions, identical to the exercise of active voting rights at the municipal level (permanent residence in the relevant municipality and being at least 18 years old on the day of the election) (Orosz et al., 2015).

The regulation of the passive right to vote is slightly different in the case of running for office in a monocratic body - the mayor of a municipality. The prerequisite is, of course, permanent residence in the relevant municipality - the candidate for this position must be a resident of the municipality in which he is running for office, but in this case the law also requires him to reach the age of 25 years on the day of the election at least (Blašková, Košťál, Novák, 2020). It should be noted that for some time a condition related to the minimal level of education (secondary education) was part of the passive right to vote. Several experts and politicians, however, drew attention to the fact that this condition is an educational discrimination that contradicts international principles, agreements and documents. After the decision of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic through its document PL. ÚS 18/2014, this condition was removed from the legal order. Such decision or the current legal status brings many complications on a practical level, as the key representatives of local government undoubtedly bear a high degree of responsibility for the functioning of local community and can damage the local government with their unprofessional decisions.

No less significant and dynamic area of the exercise of the passive right to vote are the conditions of incompatibility of the mandates – the mandate of the member of the municipal council and the mayor of the municipality mandate. In this context, the creators of the law were relating to the personal and competence spheres of the mayor's office and the office of the municipal council member. Despite the fact that a person can run for both offices (monocratic and collective body) in one and the same elections, it is not possible to exercise these two mandates at the same time. Act no. 369/1990 Coll. on the municipal establishment explicitly identifies the incompatibility of the mandate of the member of the municipal council with the function:

- (1) mayor;
- (2) employee of the municipality in which he was elected;
- (3) statutory officer of a body of the budgetary organization or contributory organization established by the municipality in which he was elected;
- (4) according to a special law.

In addition to the fact that a member of the municipal council may not hold the position of mayor of the municipality, he may not hold the position of statutory officer of a budgetary or contributory organization established by the municipality, in which the member of municipal council was elected. The incompatibility of the municipal council member office with other functions or jobs is the subject of special legislation – primarily Constitutional Act no. 357/2004 Coll. on the protection of the public interest in the performance of the functions of public officials. At this point, we consider it important to note that this law applies only to a part of members in municipal councils, namely to members in city councils and in local councils of urban districts in Bratislava and Košice.

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The logic of the mandate incompatibility in the case of municipality mayor is similar to the mentioned above. Additionally, Act no. 369/1990 Coll. about the municipal establishment identifies other obstacles in the performance of the mayor's mandate as well. The incompatibility of this mandate is based on the prevention of the cumulation of power, thus mayor cannot hold the office of:

- (1) member of municipal council;
- (2) employee of the municipality in which he was elected;
- (3) statutory officer of a body of the budgetary organization or contributory organization established by the municipality in which he was elected;
- (4) chairman of the self-governing region;
- (5) executive employee within the state administration body;
- (6) according to a special law.

Similar to members of council at the local level, the mayor of the municipality cannot hold the position of a statutory body in the budgetary and contributory organizations of his own municipality. The difference in the incompatibility between the mandate of the mayor and the mandate of the member of the municipal council is represented by the incompatibility of the mayor's office with the chairman of the self-governing region office, as well as the executive positions within the state administration bodies. The last area of incompatibility of the mayor's office can also be affected by special laws. The above-mentioned constitutional law on the protection of public interest in the performance of the functions of public officials is an example, as it applies to city and municipality mayors as well.

In the elections to municipal self-governing bodies, the current legislation allows two types of candidates for municipal council members, as well as the mayor of the municipality. The first type of candidate is the one who run through the candidate list of a political party, political movement or joint coalition. In contrast to the elections to the National Council or the elections to the European Parliament, independent candidates can also run at the municipal level. As it follows from the nature and specifics of the elections of municipal council members, a political party can list such a number of candidates, how many members are to be elected in a given electoral district. In addition to the mandatory duties and procedures for submitting candidate lists, independent candidates have a specific requirement that they must fulfil. Each of the independent candidates is obliged to submit a separate document with the signatures of citizens who support the candidacy of given independent candidate. These supporters must have a permanent residence in the municipality where the independent candidate is running for the office (both member of the council or mayor) (Orosz et al., 2015). The law establishing the conditions for the exercise of the right to vote specifies the minimal number of signatures for such an independent candidacy. The following table illustrates the minimal number of signatures of citizens supporting the candidacy of an independent candidate for the office of the municipality mayor and the office of the municipal council member.

Tab. 1 The minimal number of signatures of citizens on the list of candidates supporting the candidacy of an independent candidate in elections to local self-government bodies

Number of inhabitants of the municipality	The minimal number of signatures on the signature list supporting the candidacy of an independent candidate
less than 50	10
from 51 to 100	20
from 101 to 500	40
from 501 to 2 000	100
from 2 001 to 20 000	200
from 20 001 to 100 000	500
more than 100 000	1 000

Created by author according to Act no. 369/1990 Coll. on municipal establishment.

The legislator's intention (in the context of the imposed obligation to collect signatures of those supporting the candidacy of an independent candidate) is to compensate for the obligation of political parties to submit a sufficient number of signatures supporting the party upon its registration with the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic.

In the case of electing a mayor, the legal regulation of submission, registration and fulfilment of other requirements is almost identical to the case of electing a member of the municipal council. However, there is one fundamental difference, which stems from the essence of the mandate of municipality mayor as a monocratic authority. Since only one person is elected for the entire territory of given municipality, person who will hold this office during the entire electoral period, the entire territory of the municipality consists of only one electoral district. This is the reason why political parties, movements or coalitions can submit only one list of candidates, where only one candidate running for the mayor's office is listed. In the case of elections of council members, political parties, movements and coalitions may submit lists of candidates with varied composition, depending on the specific electoral district. They may also list more than one candidate on these lists at the same time, but no more than the number of eligible mandates in given electoral district (Bardovič, 2019). In connection with the submission of candidate lists for the elections of municipal council members and the municipality mayor, we encounter a situation that allows the same person to run for municipal council member's office as well as for mayor's office in the same elections and in the same municipality. However, in case of being elected to both offices, the elected candidate must decide which office will he hold for the given election period.

The mandate allocation mechanism is the result not only of the elections themselves, but also of the minute-book of the local electoral commission. Ultimately, it has an extremely responsible role, as the individual mandates depend on its calculation and records.

An interesting fact is that the legislative regulation of the exercise of the right to vote does not exactly define the electoral system. On the other hand, it precisely describes the procedure for finding out the results of the vote and assigning the mandates to the most successful candidates according to them. In the case of the candidates for the office of municipal council members – those who obtained the most valid votes in the given electoral district will receive the mandate, while the voter has as many votes as there are mandates in the given electoral district. In such a system, it is irrelevant what was the resulting share of votes. The absolute number of votes is important, as a candidate who received even one vote more than the other one can win a mandate. A specific case of assigning a mandate occurs in a situation when several candidates receive the same number of votes. If such candidates are running on the same candidate list of a certain political party, movement or coalition, the mandate will be automatically assigned to the one who is listed on higher position in this list (Horváth et al., 2014). The second option is that such candidates are from different political parties, movements, coalitions or they are independent. In such a situation, the electoral commission decides on the assigning of the mandate by drawing lots.

In the case of determining the election winner in the context of the mandate of the municipality mayor, it generally applies that the winner is the candidate who receives the largest number of votes from the participating voters in this mutual competition with other candidates. Due to the fact that the law does not specify a minimal quorum or clause, a minimal number of votes is sufficient to elect a mayor in some cases (Horváth et al., 2013). This situation is strikingly similar to electing the council members. A fundamental difference (in contrast to the case of members of the municipal council) occurs when the number of votes for several candidates is equal. If two or more candidates for the municipality mayor's office receive the same number of votes, the mandate is not assigned by drawing lots, but new elections for the mayor of the municipality are announced (Blašková, Košťál, Novák, 2020). At this place we consider it important to remind that directly elected monocratic bodies of local self-government (mayors) often have a low degree of legitimacy, as they can win the political battle between several candidates with a relatively low number of votes. In some municipalities the campaign before elections is not even necessary, since only one candidate is running for the post of mayor in given municipality. In such a case, single vote is really enough for the candidate to be elected. And it is this fact – the participation of single candidate in the elections, that discourages voters from participating in such elections.

An equally important matter connected to the stability of the mandates of collective and monocratic bodies of local self-government is also the matter of mandate termination. The legislator is counting on this fact as well. In the following table, we illustrate the cases when the mandate of the municipal council member as well as the mandate of mayor expires.

Tab. 2 The ways of termination of the mandate within directly elected bodies of local self-government

Member of the municipal council	Mayor of the municipality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) the refusal of taking the oath or taking the oath with reservation; (2) expiration of term; (3) resignation of mandate; (4) a final conviction for an intentional crime or a final conviction for a crime, if the prison sentence has not been suspended; (5) deprivation of legal capacity or limitation of legal capacity; (6) change of permanent residence outside the territory of the municipality; in cities with self-governing urban districts in the case of change of permanent residence outside the territory of the municipal district where he performs his office; (7) if he does not even once participate in the sessions of the municipal council during the period of one year; (8) in the case of performing a function or office incompatible with the office of a municipal council member; (9) by abolishing the municipality; (10) by death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) the refusal of taking the oath or taking the oath with reservation; (2) expiration of term; (3) resignation of mandate; (4) a final conviction for an intentional crime or a final conviction for a crime, if the prison sentence has not been suspended; (5) deprivation of legal capacity or limitation of legal capacity; (6) announcing the result of the local referendum on the recall of the mayor, which decided to recall the mayor; (7) change of permanent residence outside the territory of the municipality; in cities with self-governing urban districts in the case of change of permanent residence outside the territory of the municipal district where he performs his office; (8) if the mayor does not take a relevant action to eliminate the incompatibility of his office with another function or office within 30 days from the date of the start of this incompatibility; (9) by death; (10) by abolishing the municipality.

Created by author according to Act no. 369/1990 Coll. on municipal establishment.

If any of the above-mentioned situations occur, the mandates are terminated. If the mandate of a municipal council member expires prematurely, the vacated mandate is taken over by a substitute. The substitute is the candidate who received the highest number of votes behind the elected candidates in given electoral district. A specific case is the situation described in point no. 9, when the municipality is abolished. It is a logical consequence, that all the mandates of municipal council members as well as the mandate of the mayor are terminated, nor substitutes take their place, nor new elections are announced. All cases except point no. 2 are considered premature termination of the mandate, because the replacement of members of the council and the mayor of the municipality happens due to properly scheduled elections and not prematurely. If any of these legal reasons

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for the termination of the mayor's mandate arise (except for point no. 2), the substitute (the second candidate with the highest number of votes) does not take his place. If the post of mayor becomes vacant, the chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic will announce new elections for given municipality.

CONCLUSION

The selection of public policy actors at the local level is an important part of elections and the electoral process based on the respect for democratic norms and rules by members of the local community. Despite the fact that a strong fragmentation of residential structure is typical for the Slovak Republic, the formal rules of the selection of public policy actors are relatively same in all of its parts. The results of elections and especially the consequences of these formal rules are different in individual municipalities, since each of these municipalities represents a unique political space. However, various distortions can occur in this sphere and usually they do – not only within the democratic selection of public policy actors at the local level, but also in the process of public administration. We drew attention to the possible risks related to the public selection of actors of local self-government in multiple places within this paper, and to a certain extent, also to the responsibility for the exercise of a public function. The question of the legitimacy of the elected representatives can be regarded as relatively significant among them, especially in the case where a single candidate is running for a public function or office, which ultimately reduces voter participation in such elections. On the other hand, even the result of the elections where several candidates applied and competed for the position of mayor in Slovak self-governments does not guarantee a sufficient degree of legitimacy, or reflection of the will of majority in given local community. The last of the controversial aspects within current legislative dealing with the conditions of selection of actors at the local level is the absence of requirements for candidates to achieve other education (higher) than compulsory schooling. At present times, when self-governing units face various challenges often difficult to decide about, legislation is constantly changing and demands from residents for the provision of local services are increasing, the absence of a requirement for education is difficult to understand. At this point we consider it important to remind that despite the above-mentioned shortcomings in the legislation and several risks resulting from them, the local self-government represents a unique political space in which we form our ideological and political opinions, hence it is a political arena with its own life.

Acknowledgment: This contribution was developed within the framework of the KEGA project entitled Creation of teaching texts and teaching aids for the subject Civics from the point of view of education for democratic citizenship and critical thinking. The registration number of the project is 005UCM-4/2021.

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