

Slovakia

A gradual weakening of political parties in a stable, local electoral system

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The local government system and its recent development

The roots of the modern democratic local government system in Slovakia can be traced back to the first Czechoslovak Republic, which existed from 1918 to 1938 (Bakoš, Soukopová & Selešovský 2015). Before 1990, the federal parts of Czechoslovakia used identical systems of local administration; however, since then they have decided to use different local government systems (Klimovský, Pinterič & Jüptner 2019). Local governments legally obtained self-government status in 1990. However, in the 1990s they experienced difficulty developing due to the dominance of national politics, economic problems linked to the transition, and their own financial dependence on the state. In addition, the fragmented structure of local governments became even more pronounced: the total number of local governments increased from 2,669 units in 1989 to 2,891 units in 2002, when the fragmentation wave was stopped (Klimovský 2016).

Important systemic changes were implemented in the early 2000s as new regional governments with directly elected bodies were established; the state transferred a significant number of tasks to both regional and local governments, and conditions for the division of local governments were tightened. Consequently, fiscal decentralization was implemented, and the relevant stakeholders recognized this as an essential systemic change (Klimovský 2016). Due to strong resistance from local governments, only a very limited discussion of amalgamation reform developed in the mid-2000s. Nowadays, local governments in Slovakia are responsible for spatial planning, the construction and maintenance of local infrastructure, social care, child care, elementary education, and local development, including socioeconomic and cultural development.

Slovakia has two levels of subnational government comprising eight regional governments (from a legal point of view, two different names are used: *vyššie územné celky* and *samosprávne kraje*) and 2,890 municipalities (*obce*). While a clear majority (2,750) of all municipalities are of a rural nature, there are 141 towns (*mestá*) in Slovakia. In terms of competences and tasks, they are equal to any other municipality. Furthermore, not all towns have a real urban character. In several cases, being a town is a kind of honorary status that was acquired in the past; indeed, the population in the smallest towns is fewer than 2,000 inhabitants (Klimovský 2016). The largest

cities (Bratislava and Košice) use two-tier local governments, that is, local governments at the levels of city and city district. The local elections in the city districts follow the same rules as local elections at the city level. Although more than two-thirds of all municipalities in Slovakia are very small, having a population size of under 1,000 inhabitants, the sizes vary significantly. While the largest city is Bratislava (about 432,000 permanent inhabitants), only 12 people have their permanent residence in the rural municipality of Príkra. The average size of municipalities in Slovakia is 1,870 inhabitants. If one used the median instead (642 inhabitants), the municipal structure of Slovakia would look even more fragmented (Klobučník & Bačík 2016).

From the perspective of multilevel governance, Slovakia uses the multipurpose model (Type I) in which local and regional governments are responsible for delivering a wide range of local services (Hooghe & Marks 2001). According to the typology of Swianiewicz (2014), Slovakia could be seen as a champion of decentralization. Taking into account the Local Autonomy Index developed by Ladner et al. (2019), Slovakia's total score for the period 2010–2014 is 60.9, making it an example of Type III local autonomy (i.e., a medium level of political discretion accompanied by a medium level of financial autonomy). From the perspective of horizontal power relations, the local governments in Slovakia have a strong mayoral model (Heinelt et al. 2018) that can be understood as a local variant of presidentialism (Heinelt & Hlepas 2006). Taking into account their position and tasks, mayors have executive powers and are political leaders, as well as the heads of the local administration. In addition, despite single-winner plurality voting, they dominate local politics thanks to their power over local councils. Deputy mayors also act in the local government system, but their tasks are determined by the mayors themselves, and they usually only play a minor role in terms of political and administrative importance.

The simple rules of local elections

The first local elections took place on 23 and 24 November 1990, shortly after the legal reestablishment of democratic local government, and in many cases previous local political elites defended their mandates in these elections. For the renewed local government system, it was typical that the legal removal of the 'old principles' was a much easier task than the proper implementation of democratic institutions; indeed, the replacement of the 'old-timers' with new local politicians was slower than in some other post-Communist European countries (Illner 1999).

Local elections are organized by the State Commission for Elections and the Control of Financing of Political Parties (*Štátna komisia pre voľby a kontrolu financovania politických strán*). This independent authority manages and coordinates the activities of other involved authorities, and it is responsible for the verification of the results of all popular elections in Slovakia. Local elections are organized on the same day in all municipalities.

All collective representative bodies in Slovakia have the same four-year term of office, and the national elections and local elections used to be organized in the same years. However, this changed in 2012 due to national elections being held early. A measure of synchronization of local elections with regional elections is due to be implemented in 2022. This change required a constitutional amendment to be approved by the parliament in February 2017, with the term of office of regional governments being extended to a one-off period of five years after the elections in November 2017. The main reason for such a measure is the effort to significantly increase voter turnout for the regional elections. Surprisingly, there was an underdeveloped debate on the risks of such synchronization (e.g., both elections might get mixed up with each other and voters might become confused).

Mayors are directly elected in all municipalities regardless of size using a first-past-the-post system. A majority two-round system was never a serious topic of official political discourse, but some political parties have tried to advocate for this idea, particularly with regard to the election of mayors of the largest cities. Mayoral elections are formally separated from the elections of local councilors, but they are held on the same day. Interestingly, one person can simultaneously run for both mayor and councilor. Due to the fact that mayoral elections attract more media interest, mayoral candidates usually enjoy more visibility; indeed, for some of them it is a campaign strategy to at least secure a seat on the local council. There is no specific mechanism for the distribution of seats on local councils in order to set up majority support for mayors in Slovakia, but a system of mutual checks and balances forces elected mayors and local councilors to collaborate. A binding recall referendum is possible in local politics in Slovakia. It can be called by the local council itself if the mayor has been unable to work for more than six months. A recall referendum must be announced by a local council if there is a supporting petition of at least 30% of eligible voters; the law does not specify the need for a stated reason for such a petition.

In local council elections, a multiple nontransferable vote, also known as a 'bloc vote' or 'plurality-at-large voting', has been used since 1990. Each voter has a number of votes corresponding to the number of councilors in the relevant constituency. The candidates are ordered alphabetically by surname. Those candidates who receive the highest numbers of all valid votes obtain seats on the local councils.

Cumul des mandats is a phenomenon that is permitted in the multilevel political system of Slovakia. It is possible to combine legislative functions as well as executive and legislative ones. To have a mayoral mandate and that of an MP is quite common in Slovakia (e.g., 14 mayors were also MPs in 2015, and 13 mayors successfully ran for seats in the national parliament in 2020); however, this has been highly criticized, and there have been discussions about forbidding such an accumulation of political positions (Swianiewicz 2005: 110). Incumbency advantage is another feature of local elections in Slovakia, because the incumbents are often unchallenged. In discussing the phenomenon of incumbency, Sloboda (2014) analyzed the results of mayoral elections in Slovak towns and cities in 2006 and 2010 and concluded that the incumbency rate was approximately 85%. A deeper look at these candidates showed that about 61% were successful in the 2006 elections and 72% were successful in the 2010 elections.

An interesting possibility linked to the mergers of municipalities was approved by the parliament on 1 February 2018. Due to the fact that in a few municipalities nobody had run for mayor or local councilor, the local governments became practically dysfunctional, and the previous governments were meant to continue performing all tasks even though they had not been reelected. According to the new rules, if there are no candidates in a regular term of local elections, new elections are announced. If again nobody runs for mayor or local councilor, the government can merge this municipality with a neighboring one if the council of the neighboring municipality gives its formal approval.

Features of the electoral system

Any inhabitant with permanent residency in the municipality (regardless of citizenship) can apply for candidacy. The rule is that one person may run for mayor and/or local councilor in one electoral constituency. If a person runs for mayor and for local councilor within the same local election and wins both, that person then becomes mayor.

There are two ways to be a candidate: (1) as a candidate of political party or (2) as an independent (i.e., nonparty) candidate. Each political party registered by the Ministry of

Interior of the Slovak Republic in the Register of Political Parties and Political Movements can nominate as many candidates as the number of seats in the constituency allows; obviously, it can nominate fewer candidates as well (Klimovský 2016). Unlike political parties, independent candidates must show their support from eligible voters through petitions with voters' signatures. While only ten supporting signatures are required in municipalities of up to 50 inhabitants, 600 supporting signatures are required in cities with populations over 100,000.

Local councils can determine their own number of seats, and they are responsible for the definition of electoral constituency boundaries within some legal limits. While in mayoral elections each municipality is equal to one electoral constituency, the situation is different in the case of council elections. A basic rule is that each constituency should comprise about 1,000 voters. However, due to the fact that there are many micro municipalities in Slovakia, it is not uncommon for a constituency to be equal to the municipality as a whole. Single-member constituencies are not rare either, but usually multiple-member constituencies predominate in the municipalities and towns of Slovakia. On the other hand, there is a legal maximum of 12 local councilors that can be elected in one constituency. While larger constituencies are very common for small municipalities, in larger towns and cities, smaller constituencies comprising only a few mandates are used. District magnitude offers a possible explanation for this behavior. Because voters expect their councilors to maintain strong links with them and act as their 'delegates', it is no surprise that smaller constituencies are preferred in densely populated areas. Despite the discretion of local authorities to set the borders of constituencies, gerrymandering is not a common phenomenon at the local level. The constituencies usually respect traditional settlement structures.

The local electoral system has not significantly changed since its introduction in 1990. However, there have been a few adjustments. They have been particularly linked to the high level of municipal fragmentation. The collapse of the Communist Party regime brought about political euphoria at the end of 1989; it is thus no surprise that the number of seats on local councils was legally changed from nine to 60 councilors in 1990, with 38,490 local councilors being elected in total. The fragmentation wave of the early 1990s and the existence of micro municipalities required an amendment of the electoral law in 1992. According to this amendment, the minimum number of local councilors dropped to five councilors in those municipalities with a population of under 40 inhabitants. Although the logic of this legal effort was clear, the set minimum number of local councilors remained too high. The next significant amendment on this matter was approved in 2001: while the minimum number of local councilors dropped to three, the maximum number dropped to 45. Thanks to this amendment, the total number of local councilors decreased to 21,644 in 2002. In the following local elections, the total number of local councilors stabilized at the level of about 21,000 (20,789 local councilors were elected in Slovakia in 2018).

Basic eligibility rules were defined in 1990 and have not substantially changed. All municipal inhabitants who are 18 years or older are entitled to vote. Thanks to membership in the EU, citizens of other EU countries who are permanent residents of Slovak municipalities also have the right to vote in local elections. Voters can only vote in the municipality in which they have their permanent residence. It is not possible to vote from abroad nor in any other municipality in Slovakia. In addition, no early voting is allowed. While the right to stand for the local council elections is granted to all eligible adult voters, a candidate for mayor must be at least 25 years old during the election. Such an age requirement in the case of mayoral elections is rather common in the Central European region, and one can also find it in the history of local elections in Slovakia (Klimovský, Pinterič & Jüptner 2019).

No gender quota has been introduced in Slovakia since 1990. Interestingly, strong resistance to gender quotas has been visible in rural local political environments, which are considered more conservative in terms of various social issues, as well as in urban ones (Krivý 2013). A very interesting story is linked to the idea of introducing a minimum educational requirement for mayors. A few municipalities have experienced illiterate mayors in the past decade, especially those with large Roma communities. In 2014, this led to a decision by the parliament to introduce a minimum educational requirement for those running for mayor. The completion of secondary level education was approved as a minimum requirement. However, the constitution guarantees equal access to elected public functions, and therefore this amendment was recognized as unconstitutional, meaning that it could not become law. The parliament did not want to give up, and a new, neutral legal provision (in Section 13 of the Local Government Act) was approved: ‘The mayor shall improve their knowledge [of what is] necessary to perform the function of mayor.’ Obviously, this is a vague and tricky legal provision that has the nature of a political statement given that no sanction mechanism is connected with this ‘requirement’, and there is neither a legal definition of ‘knowledge improvement’ nor any further specification of the desired knowledge.

The gradual retreat of party candidates

Local elections had high turnout in the 1990s; the highest voter participation was achieved in 1990, when almost two-thirds of all eligible voters took part. However, voter turnout dropped to under 50% for the local elections in 2002, and since then has never achieved the participation of the majority of voters. The first four local elections (1990–2002) were organized as two-day elections, whereas all subsequent local elections were organized as one-day affairs. The local-national turnout gap is quite large in Slovakia, and parliamentary elections always attract higher voter participation in comparison with local elections (see Table 29.1). Even worse electoral participation is typical for other subnational elections, that is, regional elections. Since 2001 when the first regional elections were held, the average voter turnout for these elections has never achieved 30%.

Table 29.1 Voter turnout for local and national elections in Slovakia since 1990

<i>Local elections</i>		<i>Parliamentary elections</i>	
<i>Election date</i>	<i>Voter turnout (%)</i>	<i>Election date</i>	<i>Voter turnout (%)</i>
23–24 November 1990	63.8	8–9 June 1990 ¹	95.4
		5–6 June 1992 ¹	84.2
18–19 November 1994	52.4	30 September–1 October 1994	75.7
18–19 December 1998	54.0	25–26 September 1998 ²	84.2
6–7 December 2002	49.5	20–21 September 2002	70.1
2 December 2006	47.7	17 June 2006	54.7
27 November 2010	49.7	12 June 2010	58.8
		10 March 2012	59.1
15 November 2014	48.3	5 March 2016	59.8
10 November 2018	48.7	29 February 2020	65.8

1 Elections to the National Parliament were synchronized with elections to the Federal Parliament of Czechoslovakia.

2 National elections were synchronized with a national referendum on nonprivatization of strategic public enterprises.

Source: Official website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, sub-website ‘Elections and Referendums’

Electoral participation partially depends on the population size of the municipalities. Although there is no clear negative correlation between voter turnout and population size, voter turnout for the local elections organized in the largest cities and district capitals is usually below the average.

Local elections are organized even when the total number of candidates is lower than or equal to the number of seats on the local councils, and uncompetitive mayoral elections are also not uncommon. In the latest local elections, which took place in 2018, uncompetitive mayoral elections occurred in 762 municipalities (or 26% of the total). This situation is common in small rural municipalities, and the uncontested candidates for mayor are usually the incumbents. Several local elections in 2018 were uncontested due to either an excessively low number of candidates for councilor or a lack of candidates for mayoral or council positions (see Table 29.2). This usually happens in very small municipalities with either an elderly population or a high level of debt.

Local politics in Slovakia was particularly influenced by national political parties in the 1990s. While independent candidates in some other Central European countries used to obtain high shares of all seats on local councils, independent candidates were significantly less successful in Slovakia. According to Klimovský (2016), the results of three recent mayoral elections showed a kind of ‘escape-from-party-domination’ trend, because independent candidates succeeded in more than one-third of all mayoral elections (see Table 29.3). In addition, it must be stressed that independent candidates were also successful in the largest cities and district capitals (e.g., Bratislava, Košice, Trenčín, and Trnava), which are traditionally considered the most important local battlefields, even for national political parties. More precisely, although independent candidates were common after 1990, especially in small municipalities, the share of independent mayors and independent councilors has also dramatically increased in larger towns and cities.

A few additional points must be stressed within this context. First, being ‘independent’ became a kind of label, and two different approaches can be seen. The first group of independent candidates consists of those who were not supported by any political party from the very beginning. The second group consists of those who declared themselves independent on local lists, but who enjoyed more or less open support during the electoral campaign from one or more political parties. This group also includes those who decided to run for mayor or councilor as independent candidates exclusively within local elections (i.e., it is their local campaign strategy) even though they have clear connections to a political party. Second, only a few national political parties have nationwide structures with sufficient numbers of their own

Table 29.2 Numbers of cases with missing candidates in two recent local elections in Slovakia, 2014 and 2018

<i>Reasons for uncompetitive local elections</i>	<i>Number of municipalities</i>	
	<i>2014</i>	<i>2018</i>
Number of candidates was lower than number of seats on the local council	14	23
Nobody ran for local councilor	3	5
Nobody ran for mayor	6	11

Table 29.3 Share of independent candidates among elected councilors and mayors in Slovakia, 1990–2018

Year of local elections	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Councilors	15.9	7.8	8.9	13.5	17.1	22.7	28.9	35.4
Mayors	25.9	28.8	28.3	32.7	30.8	33.7	38.0	42.4

Source: Official website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, subwebsite ‘Elections and Referendums’

members making up potential local cadres that are ready to compete in subnational elections. From this point of view, Slovakia is a country where political parties play only a minor role in the everyday practice of local councilors (Egner, Sweeting & Klok 2013). Therefore, declared affiliation with a party might be an inaccurate indication from an analytical point of view, especially in rural areas where many candidates use party nominations in order to avoid having to collect supporting signatures (Maškarinec & Klimovský 2016).

The most successful party nominees in the 2018 local elections were from the most stable (traditional) parties with their own, well-developed local structures, especially Smer-SD, KDH, and SNS. Some parties (e.g., SaS and ĽSNS) have never established strong local structures, and others (e.g., OĽaNO and Sme Rodina) have never even had that ambition. Za ľudí was established just recently and became a member of the ruling coalition in 2020. A comparison of the electoral results of the relevant political parties (see Table 29.4) indicates that the existence of well-developed local structures is likely to be a much more important determinant of success in local elections than the number of seats held by the party in the national parliament.

There are no special provisions for ethnic or national minorities in local elections. However, political parties focusing on the Hungarian minority (especially SMK-MKP and Most-Híd) have enjoyed stable, long-lasting support, especially in regions where the Hungarian minority lives, and subnational electoral results confirm this. The Roma minority is also strong in terms of the total number of its members, but its political representation is very fragmented. This is visible in the case of parliamentary elections in particular, because political parties have their own candidates in these elections, and no ethnically Roma party has attracted any broad support from voters belonging to that ethnic group as yet. Local elections lead to different results; for instance, more 40 forty Roma mayors and more than 500 Roma councilors were elected in the latest elections.

In the 1990s, women were significantly more successful in local elections in small municipalities (Filadelfiová, Radičová & Puliš 2000: 54–56). However, according to Bútorová and Filadelfiová (2011), one can see a clear, long-lasting trend of an overall increase in women’s representation in local politics. Although a critical mass has not yet been achieved (see Table 29.5), there has been continuously higher representation of women among mayors since 1994 (Maškarinec & Klimovský 2017). Women were rather successful in the 2018 local elections and gained 740 mayoral positions and 5,404 seats on local councils. In other words, one out of four mayors is now female and approximately the same ratio between men and women exists on local councils.

Discussion: the stability of the system and the gradual weakening of political parties

Partly spontaneous and partly coordinated democratization led to the establishment of several ‘traditional’ political parties in Slovakia in the 1990s and early 2000s. These parties sought,

Table 29.4 Comparison of national and subnational electoral results of selected political parties in Slovakia

<i>Political parties and their coalitions (political parties with poorly developed subnational structures are highlighted)</i>	<i>% of votes in the parliamentary election in 2016: proportional electoral system (results of the ruling coalition are highlighted)</i>	<i>% of seats on regional councils in 2017: number of seats won/total number of regional councilors elected (416 seats)</i>	<i>% of seats on local councils in 2018: number of seats won/total number of local councilors elected</i>	<i>% of mayors affiliated with the party in 2018: directly elected</i>	<i>% of votes in the parliamentary election in 2020: proportional electoral system (results of the ruling coalition are highlighted)</i>
Parliamentary parties					
Smer-SD	28.3	13.9	17.8	20.4	18.3
SNS	8.6	2.2	8.1	5.5	3.2
Most-Híd	6.5	1.9	4.4	4.4	2.1
OLaNO	11.0	–	0.4	0.0	25.0
Sme Rodina	6.6	–	0.6	0.4	8.2
SaS	12.1	–	0.5	0.2	6.2
Za ľudí	–	–	–	–	5.8
LSNS	8.0	0.5	0.2	–	8.0
Ruling coalition's candidates (i.e., Smer-SD + SNS + Most-Híd or Smer-SD + SNS or Smer-SD + Most-Híd)	–	3.8	2.7	7.8	–
Candidates of coalitions consisting of the parliamentary opposition parties (OLaNO, Sme Rodina, SaS)	–	16.3 (total result of different coalitions that included OLaNO, SaS, KDH and some other parties)	3.7	0.5	–
The most important nonparliamentary parties and independent candidates					
KDH	4.9	–	11.4	5.4	4.7
SMK-MKP	4.0	7.2	6.0	4.0	3.9
Independent candidates (only in the subnational elections)	–	38.7	35.4	42.4	–

Source: Official website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, sub-website 'Elections and Referendums'

Table 29.5 Share of women among elected councilors and mayors in Slovakia, 1990–2018

Year of local elections	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Councilors	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	26.4	26
Mayors	n/a	15.2	17.5	18.6	20.7	21.2	23	25.3

Source: Official website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, subwebsite ‘Elections and Referendums’

among other things, to establish their own organizational units at the local level. Several other parties that were established later did not follow this organizational logic (Marušiak 2017). Instead of the development of strong local roots, some of them were established as entrepreneurial parties and they invested in modern technologies that allowed them to predict voter preferences and tailor their electoral strategies to the expectations and desires of their target groups (Žúborová 2015). It seems that these developments also significantly influenced the electoral behavior of the voters. While in the local elections they still preferred parties with clear organizational links to their communities, in national elections they tended to be subject to modern as well as unconventional strategies.

From the horizontal point of view, the high level of fragmentation used to play a significant role, and a few clear differences were visible when, for instance, comparing local electoral results from urban centers (large cities) with those from rural municipalities. The rural political environment was more favorable for independent candidates and female candidates and was much less competitive (Klimovský & Žúborová 2011). The last of these features has remained due to the low interest of parliamentary parties in local politics, especially in rural municipalities, and the phenomenon of incumbency (Sloboda 2014). However, a gradual increase in women’s representation (Maškarinec, Klimovský & Bláha 2019) and the significantly increasing success of independent candidates (Maškarinec & Klimovský 2016) have become new local political trends.

The local electoral system in Slovakia can be described as rather stable because it has not significantly changed since its introduction in 1990. The most important legal amendments reduced the size of local councils and changed the conditions to begin mayoral recall referenda, as well as the conditions of voters’ support for independent candidates (Klimovský 2016). Some of the recently approved legal adjustments have responded to publicized cases and were not of a systemic nature, for example, the minimum education requirement for mayoral candidates. At the same time, the introduction of the opportunity to merge those municipalities in which the local governments are dysfunctional and nobody seems interested in local politics seems to be a better choice than maintaining the undesired status quo.

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