

RESPONSIVENESS OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE SIZE OF MUNICIPALITIES IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract:

The paper examines the relationship between bureaucratic responsiveness of local governments and the size of municipalities in Slovakia. Using quantitative method, it finds that despite the theoretical expectations, there is only weak positive correlation between the two variables. The paper also introduces our measured data on responsiveness of local governments for the entire Slovak territory in the late 2019 and early 2020 time period and compares it to the data from a previous measurement in the early 2019. The values of responsiveness are calculated for individual districts. The paper finds that the values the two measurements – both using probability samples of Slovak municipalities, but with different municipalities in each measurement – are not always consistent, although both show the lowest values to be in Eastern Slovakia, especially in the Prešov Region. We argue that one of the main reasons for that is small size of municipalities in this region, which makes bureaucracy understaffed and shorthanded there. But this relationship is clearly only part of the explanation and other influences are also interfering, otherwise the data would have shown a stronger correlation there.

1 Introduction

In our previous researches, we were looking into the capacity and willingness of the local governments in Slovakia to respond to requests for information – one of their stated duties by law. We were either comparing levels of this responsiveness in various parts Slovakia to the levels of social capital (Bušša 2019a) or were trying to identify alternative explanations for the different levels of responsiveness in different regions and districts of Slovakia (Bušša 2019b). In one earlier research (Bušša 2017), we

tried to measure the values of social capital in Western Slovakia in the sense that Robert Putnam understood this concept. Putnam and his colleagues focused on the impact of measured social capital on the functioning of institutions, which they called the real performance of institutions. One of the indicators that used to measure the real performance of institutions was the responsiveness of bureaucracy. Since we have had already measured the values of social capital for Western Slovakia, we decided to compare the levels of social capital and responsiveness of bureaucracy. Unfortunately, we have found

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practically no relationship between the two variables. In the subsequent research, we tried to come up with an alternative explanation for the varying levels of responsiveness of the local bureaucracy in Slovakia. We came to the conclusion that the various size of municipalities in which the local governments operate might be the best predictor of the level of responsiveness – the bigger the municipality is the higher responsiveness we can expect from its local government. In this paper we are trying to confirm this relationship statistically in our sample of 380 municipalities and cities. We are also trying to compare our levels of responsiveness with the levels from our earlier research (Bušša 2019b) to find out how stable these levels are. We come to the conclusion that only some differences between levels of responsiveness at district level are stable and reliable, although the generally lower levels of responsiveness in Eastern Slovakia, which was our main finding, seems to be one of them. This is likely influenced by small size of municipalities in Eastern Slovakia. We also found that there is a positive correlation between the size of the municipalities and the level of responsiveness of the local governments in Slovakia, although the correlation is relatively weak.

2 Methodology

In our research, we measured how local governments in various parts of Slovakia responded to requests for information from citizens, to which it was their legal duty to respond in prescribed time limit. The responsiveness of the bureaucracy speaks to the ability of the authorities to adequately respond to citizens' suggestions and to provide the necessary service on their basis. It is possible to measure responsiveness in various ways, but for methodological, financial and time reasons we have chosen a simple and accessible tool - a request for information. We compiled a set of 12 questions on the administration of the municipality / city for the whole of 2019, which had the potential to reveal the inefficient use of financial resources of local governments. We sent these to the municipalities and cities of the Slovak Republic in December 2019 and evaluated three different features: response / non-response to the request (2 points), timely / delayed response (1 point), complete / incomplete response (1 point). It is a quasi-experimental research design that is usually ethically problematic in the social

sciences, as it involves manipulation of people (Disman 2006). In our case, however, it was an examination of whether public administration employees will behave in accordance with the law and fulfill their duty towards a citizen requesting specific information, whose role we played in this quasi-experiment. One of the questions we had to answer when creating the research design was which level of authorities would be right to include in our research. If we wanted to repeat the procedure from Making Democracy Work as faithfully as possible, we would choose the level of self-governing regions. But in Slovak case there is just eight self-governing regions, which is a relatively small number to use for finding correlations and these regions are not always ideally defined. Self-governing regions are very large and often artificially combine disparate natural regions with different values of variables, which was criticized by Sloboda and Dostál (2005). We therefore chose local governments, the high number of which allows us to obtain enough data. But we came across the opposite problem. Even with the use of email, we would not be able to manage communication with all 2890 municipalities in Slovakia and evaluate their reactions to our suggestions. Therefore, we created a simple random sample of 380 municipalities by drawing lots, which represents about 13% of all municipalities, and we addressed those. For such a sample, it is necessary to take into account a deviation of around 5%, which is acceptable for our purposes, as we tried to get only a basic idea of the spatial distribution of the researched property. We were particularly interested in the relationship between responsiveness of the local government and the size of population of the given municipality or city. We compared the size and the responsiveness at the local level and computed the correlation between the two variables. Then we also transformed the obtained data on responsiveness into values for individual districts as it is shown in the Table 1 and represented on the map of Slovakia in Fig. 1. To collect the data, we collaborated with the students of the master degree study program of political science at the Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín. Each student had a part of 380 municipalities to ask for information from and to find out the official number of its inhabitants. They subsequently evaluated if each local government answered the questions they sent, if it answered in time and if there was any question omitted. A municipality

could gain 0, 2, 3 or 4 points. In case of not receiving the information at all, the municipality was awarded 0 points. In case of responding, but both late and incompletely, it would still get 2 points. In case of responding but either late or not to all required questions, the student was awarding it 3 points. If it responded in time and to all questions, it got 4 points. Due to considerable differences between the municipalities, it would not be useful to make the evaluation of the responsiveness of the local governments any more complex. This value of 0 to 4 points was then compared to the size of the municipality to find out, if there is a positive statistical correlation between the two variables.

3 Results of the Research

This was the second time we used probability sampling to create a representative sample of the municipalities and cities in Slovakia. The first time it consisted of 400 municipalities out of the total of 2890, this time it was 380 municipalities, but since we were using the original sampling sequence, none of the 380 municipalities was identical with the 400 contained in the first sampling. Theoretically, we could combine them into a combined sample of 780 municipalities, but we decided not to, since there was a year difference between gathering the data in the first and the second.

The largest city in our current sample was Nitra with almost 80000 inhabitants, responding in time and to all questions, and the smallest was Uhrovské Podhradie with less than 40 and not responding at all. These reactions were quite typical among the largest cities and the smallest municipalities respectively. However, when we calculated the correlation between the two variables among all 380 cases, the relationship seemed much less clear and the correlation was only 0,12. So there is a positive relationship, but the size of the population is far from being reliable predictor of responsiveness of the local governments.

In the next step, we calculated average values of bureaucratic responsiveness for individual districts in Slovakia. There are 79 districts, but 9 of them are just parts of the two big cities – Bratislava and Košice – neither one of which is included in our sample. There is also no municipality belonging to the Banská Štiavnica District. These districts are therefore without data. There are also some districts being represented by just one municipality or city,

which makes reliability of values for these districts questionable. There is a star next to those districts in the Table 1. The districts are Kysucké Nové Mesto, Levoča, Turčianske Teplice and Šaľa.

We can see quite big differences between districts, even between districts lying next to each other. This is probably caused by relatively low number of municipalities representing each district in our sample. Were there more municipalities in the sample, we would probably see some regression toward the mean. We can generally observe low values of responsiveness in the easternmost districts in Slovakia and in most of the southern ones.

In the Fig. 1 we can see the spatial distribution of the districts with colors representing different levels of responsiveness – red means none, green means full responsiveness of the local governments in the given district. We can see that generally higher levels are around big cities and in more developed north-west of the country. Although there are exemptions such as Žilina district.



Fig. 1 Levels of responsiveness of local governments in Slovak districts (green: complete responsiveness, red: complete non-responsiveness) in late 2019 and early 2020.

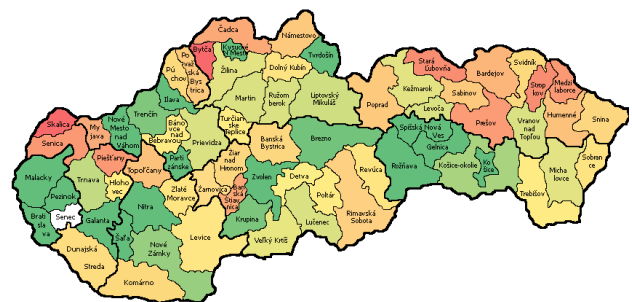


Fig. 2 Levels of responsiveness of local governments in Slovak districts (green: complete responsiveness, red: complete non-responsiveness) in early 2019

Table 1 Calculated average values of bureaucratic responsiveness for individual districts in Slovakia (4: full, 0: none) in alphabetical order. Source: research of the author.

District	Results	District	Results
Bánovce and Bebravou	2,00	Poltár	4,00
Banská Bystrica	3,20	Poprad	2,67
Bardejov	2,29	Považská Bystrica	3,20
Brezno	3,33	Prešov	2,33
Bytča	2,67	Prievidza	3,20
Čadca	3,00	Púchov	3,00
Detva	2,67	Revúca	2,40
Dolný Kubín	2,00	Rimavská Sobota	1,44
Dunajská Streda	2,00	Rožňava	1,38
Galanta	2,20	Ružomberok	4,00
Gelnica	1,50	Sabinov	2,00
Hlohovec	3,00	Senec	2,75
Humenné	1,33	Senica	2,40
Ilava	2,00	Skalica	4,00
Kežmarok	4,00	Snina	2,00
Komárno	2,38	Sobrance	1,00
Košice-okolie	3,20	Spišská Nová Ves	2,71
Krupina	3,00	Stará Ľubovňa	1,33
Kysucké Nové Mesto*	0,00	Stropkov	2,33
Levice	3,25	Svidník	0,67
Levoča*	4,00	Šaľa*	0,00
Liptovský Mikuláš	3,50	Topoľčany	3,29
Lučenec	3,00	Trebišov	1,78
Malacky	3,50	Trenčín	2,67
Martin	2,80	Trnava	2,70
Medzilaborce	1,33	Turčianske Teplice*	4,00
Michalovce	2,29	Tvrdošín	4,00
Myjava	2,00	Veľký Krtíš	2,08
Námestovo	3,67	Vranov and Topľou	2,29
Nitra	2,00	Zlaté Moravce	3,38
Nové Mesto nad Váhom	4,00	Zvolen	3,00
Nové Zámky	3,20	Žarnovica	3,50
Partizánske	4,00	Žiar and Hronom	1,33
Pezinok	4,00	Žilina	0,00
Piešťany	2,00		

We can compare the distribution in Fig. 1 with the results of the earlier research in Fig. 2. We can see that the distribution of values is not very stable. In the Fig. 2 the south has somewhat higher values. But both show the Eastern Slovakia as the region with low responsiveness, as well as south of the central Slovakia to a smaller extent. Other areas with low values according to Fig. 2 are looking better now, according to the Fig. 1.

4 Discussion

Again, it is worth mentioning that the data are less reliable when converted for districts, nevertheless it is possible to notice at least two areas with a low degree of responsiveness of local governments - most of the Prešov Region together with the eastern part of the Košice Region and the southern part of the central Slovakia, or of the Banská Bystrica Region. Both are among the least developed parts of Slovakia.

In addition to the generally lower level of economic development of this area and emigration from the territory, it should also be mentioned that the low level of responsiveness may be due to the very small size of municipalities in the area - especially in the Eastern Slovakia. As Čavoječ and Sloboda (2005), Tichý (2005) or Daško (2015) note, with the decreasing number of inhabitants of the village, the number of employees whose local authority can employ also decreases and ultimately the workload of employees increases disproportionately. In the case of smaller municipalities, there is also smaller chance that they will fulfill their legal obligations. They simply won't have enough time and workforce for them. If a municipality is small enough, even the most basic duties are becoming a challenge to fulfill. Often the people in elected posts are doing a great deal of unpaid work in order to keep their villages functional. On the other hand, we can see that even some of the cities or big municipalities are not fulfilling their duties as they should. So we can't expect that some simple administrative decision alone – such as merging the small municipalities together – would automatically cure all the problems.

It might be useful to try to merge the results from the two rounds of our research as they are shown in the Fig. 1 and 2 respectively. We were reluctant to do that because of differences between the

two. They are very similar in terms of requests to the local governments - the only difference is the time period about which we requested the information in the first and the second round has changed because we requested it a year later in the second round. Otherwise the kind of requests was very similar.

The other problem with merging the results from the two rounds together is the different time in which we were requesting it. It was a similar time of the year, but in very different part of the electoral cycle of local governments, which is the most likely thing to influence the responsiveness of the municipalities in cases such as this one. The first round was conducted right after the municipal elections, which took place at the beginning of November 2018. The second round, which we write about in this paper, was conducted more than a year after the new local governments were in place and they were to report information about their own conduct. So from this point of view the situation was not the same for the municipalities from the first and the second round of requesting the information.

Still, should we merge the data we would gain a sample of 780 municipalities, which is more than a quarter of all cities and municipalities in Slovakia and the results would be much more reliable in this respect. Especially the data for individual districts, which we currently calculate out of too small number of municipalities in each district. So depending on which municipalities are representing the district, the district average can change quite significantly between individual measurements. This problem would be reduced, which might be a good enough reason to try to do it despite the mentioned disadvantages. We might try to do this and see if some of the researched relationships appear stronger than they appear now when using smaller samples. In that case an entirely new round of research with a bigger sample would be justified to confirm those new findings.

5 Conclusion

The findings presented are particularly beneficial in that they provide impetus for further research. We have not been fully successful in confirming that the size of municipalities would be a good predictor of the degree of responsiveness of local

governments. There is this correlation, but it is a weak one. However, a look at the data for the whole of Slovakia suggests that the level of responsiveness follows a certain logic - it is steadily declining from northwest to southeast. We can see that a bigger sample would be helpful in clearing up the relationships between the variables. It is possible that under such circumstances we would be able to identify some new relevant variables influencing the responsiveness levels. And maybe even the correlation with the size of the municipalities would turn out to be higher. Therefore, further research will be needed.

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