

TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SLOVAKIA



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Delivering Good Governance in Slovakia

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Introduction

This analysis is an outcome of the project Delivering Good Governance in Slovakia, Output 1.5: National Training and Capacity-Building Strategy (NTS) for public/local authorities is prepared on the basis of the Training and Capacity Needs Analysis (TNA).

■ Training and Capacity Needs Analysis is the basis (arguments and evidence) for the preparation of the National Training and Capacity-Building Strategy.

■ This report provides the results from qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the Institute of Public Policy (IPP).

This report offers the synthesis of two types of data (points of views) on training needs:

- ▶ beliefs relating to the training needs among the potential target audience. In other words, important sources of information are the views, desires and suggestions of stakeholders (employees of local government offices – local officials, chief administrative officers – heads of local offices, mayors) on training needs.
- ▶ problems and barriers in delivering services and in performing competences. These problems and barriers indicate the type and the extent of training needs and the desirable level of knowledge or skills that may contribute to achieving a desirable state of affairs.

■ This report separates the former (desires) from the latter (needs). The training needs arise not (only) from the desires and suggestions of stakeholders but mainly from deficiencies related to constraints in the performance of a local government unit. The in-depth analysis of these deficiencies helped to identify the required level of competences and skills of the employees in local government offices. We are aware that training and educational programmes are not the solutions for all problems. Therefore, this report investigated the systemic constraints that prevent the local government units from performing their tasks efficiently. The TNA helps to identify the discrepancies between the skills and competences held by employees of local government offices, chief administrative officers and mayors as potential target groups of educational efforts and the skills and competences which are required or needed.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- ▶ CAO – Chief Administrative Officer
- ▶ FG – Focus Group
- ▶ IDI – In-depth Interviews
- ▶ IPP – Institute of Public Policy (*Ústav verejnej politiky*)
- ▶ JMO – Joint Municipal Office
- ▶ LGU – Local Government Unit
- ▶ Mol – Ministry of Interior
- ▶ RVC – Regional Training Center (*Regionálne vzdelávacie centrum*)
- ▶ TNA – Training Needs Analysis
- ▶ ZMOS – Association of Towns and Municipalities (*Združenie miest a obcí Slovenska*)

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Executive Summary

This section briefly highlights the most important findings in four investigated areas:

- ▶ a.) general assessment and inefficiencies of the local government system,
- ▶ b.) performance of local government units (hereinafter LGUs),
- ▶ c.) motivation of officials in local government offices, and
- ▶ d.) training needs.

General assessment and inefficiencies of the local government system

■ Quality of performance of Slovak local government units is (according to respondents) relatively satisfactory, considering the high number of competences and the lack of financial resources they report.

■ However, the high level of fragmentation of the local self-government system causes problems with capacities (financial or personal), especially for small local government units. The lack of capacities puts them rather in a position of caretakers with very limited abilities to develop and innovate.

■ In order to overcome problems with fragmentation, intermunicipal cooperation in the form of joint offices is very common in some areas (especially local construction and education). Still, intermunicipal cooperation is a result of necessity (for small local government units) rather than a sign of systematic cooperation. Moreover, cooperation is not systematically supported by the state (financially or methodologically) and a lot of local representatives are reluctant to delegate more competences to joint municipal offices (hereinafter JMOs).

■ The changes of legislation affecting the local government units are too frequent and not accompanied by impact assessment or clear guidelines for implementation. The distribution of information is not sufficient and local government units do not have enough time to prepare for the changes which oftentimes leads to inadvertent violations of regulations.

■ Financial transparency of the income tax distribution for performing original competences is perceived positively, on the other hand, financial transfers accompanying transferred competences are considered to be insufficient and often subsidised from own revenues.

■ Many competences are not logically and comprehensively divided among local government units, state district authorities and regions. This is very apparent in some of the areas (such as environmental) where local government units have to wait for formal decisions of other authorities which consequently prolongs the process of performing their own competence.

■ Most of the respondents specified one particular area that is the most problematic for them – building authority (local construction office). The area is very technical, requires skilled and educated employees who are difficult to train and hire and does not leave room for local government units to influence the outcome. As such, local government units would rather relinquish it in favour of the state or retain it but with a significant increase of financial transfer for this transferred competence.

■ The position of the chief administrative officer (head of the local government office) is not clearly defined in the legislation, although it is the second most prominent person in the local executive. A more precise definition of this position (competences, tasks and duties) could help to further professionalise the day-to-day operation of local government offices.

■ There is an excessive bureaucracy related to the administration of the EU funds. The rules for implementing EU projects are far stricter than those defined by the European Commission (gold-plating), which creates problems with personal and time capacities, as well as problems with cash flow.

■ The communication of state authorities is poor and local representatives feel like they have nobody to refer to. The cooperation and information transfer across ministries and other state authorities themselves are considered to be a problem. Local representatives are often referred to the Ministry of Interior (also as Mol) whose employees often lack the relevant knowledge in a specific area.

■ There is a poor execution and a lack of support from the state in the digitalisation area, considering its costs. Local representatives feel that the digitalisation was executed without proper preparations, without necessary hardware and software prerequisites and training of local officials. Among other things, they still have to process a lot of agenda in both digital and paper form.

The performance of local government units

■ LGUs (especially smaller ones) prioritise day-to-day management and “bread and butter” agenda over development, new public policies and services and innovations. This is mainly caused by the fragmentation of the system and significant investment debt, especially in infrastructure (roads, waste management, water-works, schools etc.).

■ The performance of the local officials (e.g. level of expertise, overall quality of work, quality of services) is generally perceived as satisfactory. On the other hand, respondents also reported a lack of motivation and willingness to innovate and lack of flexibility in solving problems. This may be related both to the nature of work in local authorities (monotony and strict “structuring” of tasks based on legislative obligations), but also to limited personal appraisal and financial resources which make it difficult to compete with the private sector for good quality employees.

■ The basic (organisational) management of a local office is considered to be unproblematic in most of the cases. On the other hand, local government units most often suffer problems in fundraising and resource management from external sources, investments in transport and infrastructure and waste management. Other problematic areas include the implementation of e-government, public procurement, social policy and administrative proceedings.

■ A minimum of local governments does some form of organisational self-assessment (e.g. CAF). However, the majority of local governments conduct individual performance evaluation of their staff on an irregular and informal basis. The performance of employees is usually evaluated by the heads of individual departments and sections and then these evaluations (written or verbal) are passed on to the mayor, sometimes with a proposal of rewards or personal appraisals.

■ The local representatives consider sufficient technical equipment at the office as the most pressing need with regard to the performance of the local government units. A lot of local units (especially small ones) lack proper hardware equipment, software licences and in some cases, even a functioning internet connection.

Motivation of officials in local government offices

■ Wage level is one of the biggest constraints for hiring good quality employees who prefer higher salaries in the private sector. However, there are other important factors which influence the attractiveness of work in local public administration – a balance between career and private life, job stability, an opportunity to work for the public good, vicinity (from home to work), or good relations in the workplace.

■ On the contrary, excessive critique by the citizens – oftentimes personalised towards the local officials, low or non-existent career advancement opportunities, small room for innovation and excessive bureaucracy are perceived to be the barriers for working at a local government office.

■ Local officials are encouraged to innovate and to come up with ideas. However, local officials do not have slack (time) for innovations of processes or public policies, mainly due to their workload.

■ Systematic analysis of staff satisfaction with their work and terms of employment is missing even in larger LGUs. Staff satisfaction is analysed on an irregular basis, ordinarily in the form of discussion with the head of the department.

■ Level of remuneration and financial bonuses, ideally based on performance appraisal, are also among the most important motivational factors. However, the respondents indicate that a good perceptive head of department as well as verbal praise are significant motivational factors to get engaged and work better.

■ Financial bonus is more or less the most often used tool to motivate the staff. Financial bonuses (e.g. on a semi-annual basis) are also a tool in how to increase low salaries in local public administration.

Trainings – current state and room for improvement

■ Respondents indicate that a large majority of LGUs do not develop a training plan for their staff and analyse the training needs of their staff on an irregular basis. However, no LGU has a formal procedure, an ordinance or a rule which defines how training needs should be analysed. The most often used tool for analysis of training needs is an individual (one to one) conversation with an employee.

■ Ability to work with computer and standard software tools (Word, Excel, e-mail, e-gov systems) became a basic prerequisite for employees in local administration. These skills are perceived as fundamental especially because of the gradual digitalisation of services. This puts the pressure not only on the technical skills of local officials, but also on the equipment in local offices.

■ Local executive representatives (mayors, CAOs) are aware of the importance of soft skills for the local officials (especially front office) and perceive them as an extension of officials' expertise. However, it is not the priority in any LGU, and local representatives rather prioritise training events which develop officials' expertise and knowledge of legislation.

Majority of local councillors do not participate in training events due to various reasons (unwillingness, lack of time or motivation, etc.) even though this specific group need trainings on the competences of LGUs, their rights, duties and legal possibilities and the position of the local council in the local government system as such.

Several respondents would appreciate executive training for mayors. This type of formalised education programme (for instance, about competences of LGUs, overview of legislation) is missing. Exchange visits were also identified as very efficient and often used training method.

The most needed training topics for staff of local government offices (cross-checked with problems and attendance at training events declared by the representatives of LGUs) relate to

- ▶ a.) implementation of e-administration and computerisation of the office,
- ▶ b.) planning and implementation of infrastructural investments,
- ▶ c.) raising, servicing and management of external funding,
- ▶ d.) computer/IT training, use of IT tools,
- ▶ e.) building relationships with residents and public consultations, and
- ▶ f.) strategic management of the local government unit.

Training events related to analytical skill, public policy development, public management practices, innovation development and implementation, or behavioural insights in policymaking are usually not provided.

Informal communities of practice (e.g. groups of mayors) are perceived as one of the most effective and efficient methods for sharing experiences and setting up cooperation and consultation.

Adaptation training (senior employees train new employees) is formalised only in a minority of towns and cities (e.g. Bratislava, Zvolen, etc.), either via two or three-day intensive training. However, in most of the interviewed LGUs, adaptation training is not formalised, and it usually takes the form of supervision by a senior or a leaving employee.

The training market is heterogeneous, ranging from private, non-profit, professional associations to state providers. Nevertheless, it is dominated by one major player – regional training centres (RVCs), most of which are non-profit organisations. RVCs provide training (lectures) related to new amendments in legislation, accounting, taxes, specialised (two-day) training for so called “professional groups” - employees at local construction offices, registry offices and other highly specialised positions (organised once or twice a year). There are also private providers, for instance the Institute of Lifelong Learning (icv.sk) based in Košice, that provide training events on transferred competences. Some LGUs hire other private firms to cover the agenda that is not provided by the abovementioned actors (e.g. soft skills, stress management, conflict mediation, etc.). The most important selection criteria for a training provider is previous experience with a lecturer who determines the quality of training event. According to the respondents, training sessions provided by ministries are perceived to be the least sufficient in terms of quality – respondents complained that they often consist of ministry officials reading out the relevant legal act word by word.

Methodology

This analysis focuses on the capacity and training needs of local governments in Slovakia. The main goal of the exploratory research is to identify the factors which determine efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness of local governments in Slovakia. The analysis has the following elements:

- ▶ a.) institutional and non-institutional obstacles and barriers in delivering services and performance of competences of local government,
- ▶ b.) scope and nature of administrative, political and functional decentralisation,
- ▶ c.) training expectations among key stakeholders in the local government sector,
- ▶ d.) legal and institutional context of operation for local administration,
- ▶ e.) political and social context and its impact on the operations of local government.

The analysis of the abovementioned factors and elements provides the evidence that indicates the type and the extent of training needs and the desirable level of knowledge or skills of employee(s) of local government.

■ The research aimed at identifying the capacities and training needs of LGUs in Slovakia. The analysis covers both desired or most needed areas of training as well as objective training needs which are justified by the problems and barriers in delivering services and in performing competences.

The TNA focuses on the following groups of stakeholders:

- ▶ mayors
- ▶ CAOs
- ▶ employees of local governments (HR agenda)
- ▶ representatives of regional training centres
- ▶ experts on local government
- ▶ representatives of two major associations

■ To this end, we utilised qualitative research methods (in-depth interviews, focus groups) and quantitative research method (survey). This analysis also employs complementary document analysis (legal documents, policy documents, strategies, media coverage). Between November 2019 and February 2020, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews (IDI) in total with mayors (8), CAOs (6), employees of local governments (5, HR agenda) representatives of regional training centres (2), a local activist (1), an expert on legislation (1), representatives of two associations (2, Association of Towns and Municipalities, Union of Towns and Cities). Each IDI lasts approximately 60 minutes. We also conducted three focus groups (FGs) organised in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica and Košice, each with a specific group of respondents (employees in HR agenda, CAOs, mayors). Each FG lasts approximately 120 minutes.

Table 1: Focus Group

	Place	Date	Group of stakeholders	No. of participants
FG 1	Bratislava	11/11/2019	Employees in HR agenda	10
FG 2	Banská Bystrica	27/1/2020	CAOs	10
FG 3	Košice	31/1/2020	Mayors	8

Source: Authors

■ The IDI aimed to record the knowledge and experience of the interviewees and disclose their personal perceptions and attitudes. On the other hand, the focus groups aimed to create an open forum for debate among participants. This allows for cross-checking and balancing the different arguments and opinions, perceptions and positions of the different (and sometimes even opponent...) actors and stakeholders.

¹ Please see the list of IDIs in References

IDI and FG focused on the following topics:

- ▶ Assessment of the operations of local government at the local level (performance of local government and its administration, inter-municipal cooperation, management of human resources, personal appraisal)
- ▶ Attitudes related to training and training activities organised by the stakeholder (previous experience with training activities, motivation of employees to take part in training activities)
- ▶ Perception of training needs (types of training activities needed, desired level of competences and skills of employees in administration)

Each respondent of IDI and FG was informed about the project and signed their consent to participation in the research project.

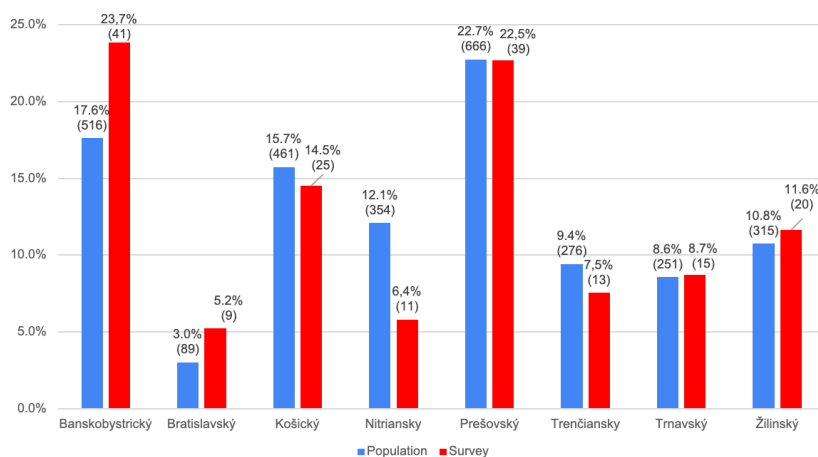
The survey was performed using Qualtrics software. Due to the high level of territorial fragmentation, there are 2,960 (Bratislava and Košice districts included) LGUs in Slovakia. In order to be able to control the distribution and notifications (e-mail and call reminders) and to receive a solid response rate we have created a sample of 398 LGUs in Slovakia. We used stratified randomisation to ensure that the sample will include specific groups in a sample that might otherwise be poorly represented by using a simple random sample which may not include enough observation to allow meaningful analysis to be conducted. The population – all local governments – was divided into non-overlapping groups (strata) based on two characteristics – population size and geographic location (county) – and drawing a simple random sample from within each stratum. The number selected from each stratum is equivalent to the stratum’s proportion of the total population.

The survey was implemented in April 2020 and the collection of responses ended in May 15 (further “Survey 2020”). The survey was distributed via Qualtrics and sent to the sample of LGUs (mayors or/and CAO). In total, four rounds of e-mail reminders were sent and one round of call reminders. Of 398 LGUs, we collected survey data from 173 LGUs (response rate of 43.5 %) – 154 fully completed questionnaires.

In figure 1 below, we illustrate the comparison between the distribution of the sample and total population – total number of LGUs in each county. Figure 1 also provides information on the response rate and absolute number of surveyed LGUs per each size group.

The data shows that the representation of LGUs in the final data file is relatively congruent with the characteristics of the total population LGUs in Slovakia. We see a slight overrepresentation of LGUs in two counties (Banská Bystrica and Bratislava) and underrepresentation in one county (Nitra).

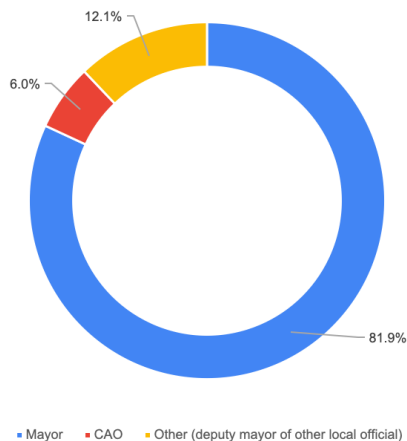
Figure 1: Geographical distribution of LGUs participating in the survey and total population



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: The first column (blue) represents the share of LGUs in each county as a percentage of the total number of LGUs in Slovakia. The second column (orange) represents the share of LGUs participating in the survey in each county as a percentage of the total number of LGUs included in the sample.

For a distribution of the survey, we used the official e-mail addresses of mayors and/or official e-mail of an LGU (usually the mayor's office). The database of all e-mail addresses was provided by the Ministry of Interior. Hence, the strong majority of respondents in the survey were mayors (82 %) and approximately one out of five respondents held a position of CAO or other local government official.

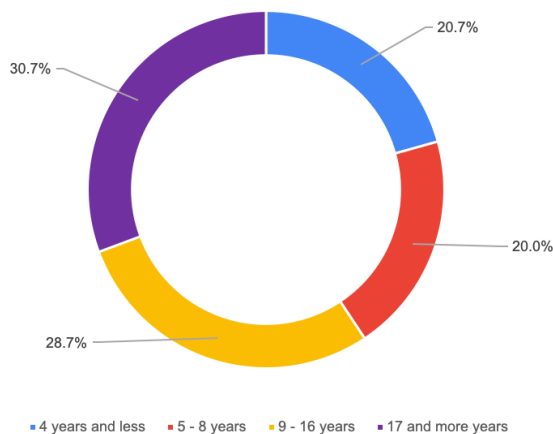
Figure 2: Position of the respondents



Source: Survey, 2020

The average length of service of the respondents is 12 years. The majority of respondents (59.4%) have experience in local public administration for 9 and more years, and almost 4 out of 5 respondents have served in the LGU more than 5. Due to the fact that 82% of respondents were mayors, the data implies many years of experience in public administration and in managing an LGU for several electoral terms.

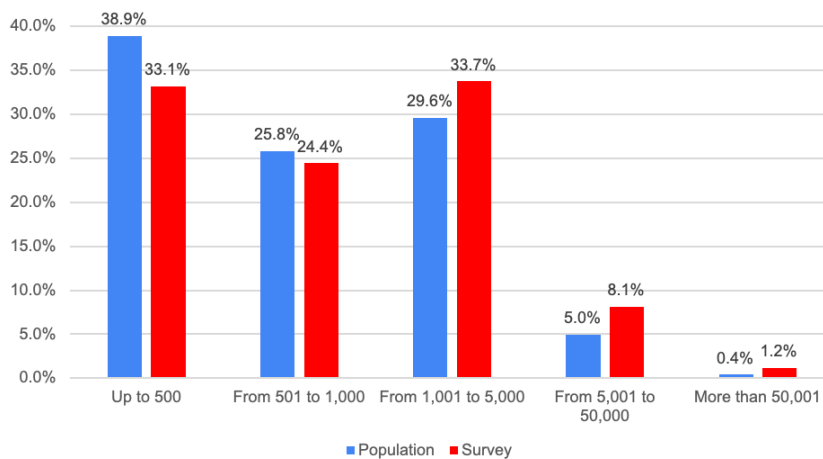
Figure 3: Service length and position of the respondents



Source: Survey, 2020

In most cases, the respondents represented LGUs with no more than 1,000 inhabitants. The data distribution is congruent with the distribution of LGU population. This suggests that the survey results may correspond well to the reality.

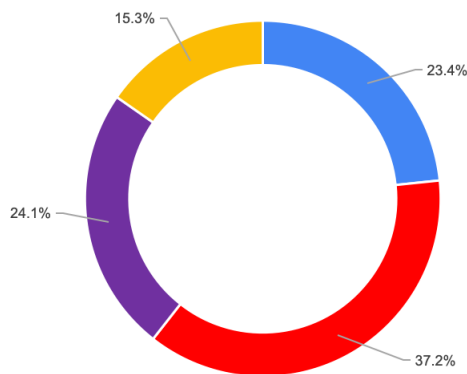
Figure 4: Size of LGUs



Source: Survey, 2020

The size of LGUs implies the size of LGU administration. There are usually less than three full time employees (mayor excluded) in LGUs with less than 1,000 inhabitants. Employees have to cover various agendas which creates pressure on the general outlook in the competences and tasks of LGUs, without the possibility of significant specialisation in one agenda.

Figure 5: Size of LGU administration (full time employees, mayor excluded)



Legend: 1 or no full time employee (blue), 2 or 3 full time employees (red), 4 to 8 full time employees (purple), 9 and more full time employees (yellow)

Source: Survey, 2020

Local Public Administration System in Slovakia

In this section, we will present a general overview on the local public administration system in Slovakia. Firstly, we will address the historical development and current state of the local public administration in Slovakia. Then, we will focus on the efforts to tackle one of the biggest problems of the Slovak local self-government system – its fragmentation. Lastly, we will offer a brief overview of the competences, finances and leadership of local government units.

Development of local public administration since the establishment of the Slovak Republic

Since 1993, when Slovakia became an independent state (after the division of Czechoslovakia), the process of local government reforms has been underway. Three main stages of ongoing reform process can be distinguished since 1990:

- ▶ 1. early stage (preparation stage) of reform (1990 – 1991)
- ▶ 2. territorial public administration reform (1995 – 1996)
- ▶ 3. systematic public administration reform (1999 – ongoing)
(Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak republic, 2013)

Adopting the Act 369/1990 on Municipalities was a cornerstone for further formation of a modern and decentralised local government system. State administration was separated from local elected self-government, whilst the former territorial and administrative divisions (West, Central and East Slovak County + Bratislava) were replaced by a model of 38 district offices (okresné úrady) and 121 local state administration offices (obvodné úrady) and specific agendas (e.g. environmental, tax, tolls, environmental and labour and social affairs agenda) were executed via specialised state administration authorities. For the first time, a dual system of local government was established. However, the local self-government units were weak, not so much in terms of formal competences, as in their abilities and resources to perform them. The whole system was highly politicised and, due to the non-transparent system of financing, municipal leaders were dependent on good relations with the government if they wanted to gain resources needed for development of their LGU.

In 1996, under the rule of Vladimír Mečiar's government, a new model of local government system was adopted. By the Act 221/1996, local government offices were eliminated and replaced by the model of 8 regional offices as the second level of state administration and 79 district offices as local state administration (Pilát, 2010). By the introduction of this approach, the state control over local government was stabilised, even empowered. Despite the critique of this model from European Union representatives, as well as many civic and professional organisations interested in the local government reforms, it lasted until the next general election in 1998.

■ Since 1998 (1999), many attempts towards further reform of local government system have occurred. In 1999, the new position of Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Public Administration Reform was formed. Viktor Nižňanský was appointed and was responsible for developing the strategy for decentralisation and public sector reform. Two fundamental documents were developed: *Strategy of the Public Administration Reform of the Slovak Republic* and the *Concept of Decentralisation and Modernisation of the Public Administration in the Slovak Republic*; both were subsequently adopted by the Slovak Government in 1999 and 2000.

■ Three essential tasks were defined in these documents to ensure comprehensive and successful decentralisation reform:

- ▶ 1. re-division of country (territorial reform)
- ▶ 2. institutional reform
- ▶ 3. public administration modernisation based on state audit decentralisation (fiscal, competences and power) (Pilát, 2010)

■ Therefore, to fulfil the abovementioned tasks, a significant number of new legislations were adopted in a relatively short time (during 2001) to launch the reform process (Nemec, 2018). Territorial reform started with Act 302/2001 on Higher Territorial Units (VÚC) which introduced 8 regional self-governing regions (VÚC) while the regional division of state administration persisted. Furthermore, Act 416/2001 on the Transfer of Competences from State Administration Bodies to Lower Territorial Units (Act on Competences) can be perceived as the most important towards a further decentralised system of local government. During 2002 – 2004, more than 400 competences, as well as assets and possessions, were transferred to local units (Neubauerová, 2003). According to Nemec (2018): *“The reform transferred a massive set of responsibilities to local and regional self-governments, but did not introduce other crucial elements of decentralisation, mainly real fiscal decentralisation (new responsibilities were financed by grants and not from own revenues of self-governments).”* (p. 118)

■ The new Slovak Government, led by the re-elected prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda in 2002, coordinated the second wave of decentralisation with the Project of Further Public Administration Decentralisation for 2003 – 2006 which focused on fiscal decentralisation as well as some additional changes in the territorial structure of state administration bodies. In 2003, Public Finance Management Reform Strategy was adopted by the Slovak Government; it included medium-term programme performance budgeting, the establishment of the Treasury, a switch to accrual accounting and the abolishment of several specific state financial funds all under the leadership of the Ministry of Finance (Nemec, 2018, p. 119). In 2005, the second phase of fiscal decentralisation was launched and was framed by five Acts reflecting the budgeting regulations, public and local administration, local taxes and collection and redistribution of other fees (Kozovský – Žárska, 2008).

■ No significant reforms in the local government arena have been undertaken since the abovementioned efforts by Dzurinda’s governments. Some reforming measures were conducted under initiatives from the European Union, specifically, Open Government Partnership and ESO Program (for state administration), which were mainly to enhance e-government, transparency, scrutiny, and public participation in policy-making. The new Government of the Slovak Republic elected in 2020 has declared its main interest in structural reform of public administration. A new committee for Structural Reform of Public Administration will be established with the ambition to elaborate a comprehensive public administration reform plan.

Current state of local government system in Slovakia

■ Nowadays, the local self-governing level of public administration has persisted in the dual model: state public administration and self-government local administration. There are eight Higher Territorial Units and 2,927 LGU – cities, towns and villages in Slovakia.

Table 2: Structure of territorial units

Name of VÚC/region	Number of LGUs	Number of districts	Number of inhabitants
Region of Bratislava	89	8	669 592
Region of Trnava	251	7	564 917
Region of Trenčín	276	9	584 596
Region of Nitra	354	7	674 306
Region of Žilina	315	11	691 509
Region of Banská Bystrica	516	13	645 276
Region of Prešov	665	13	826 244
Region of Bratislava	461	11	801 460

Source: Authors

■ The rules for the functioning of local self-government are regulated by Slovak legislation, particularly the Act on Municipalities. This law defines in more detail the basic units of territorial public administration – LGUs.

■ There are 2,927 LGU in Slovakia each of which has its own local council, consisting of at least three elected representatives and is elected according to the number of inhabitants. The Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic defines the specific standing of cities, which are: economic, administrative and cultural centres, areas of tourism, important transport hubs and also provide services to the inhabitants of the surrounding towns and villages. The law also defines the requirement of a minimum number of 5,000 inhabitants and the urban character of the development. The law also allows an LGU to declare itself a city even if it has less than 5,000 inhabitants on the proviso it meets other conditions. Currently, a total of 140 LGU have the standing of city (SO SR, 2015). The cities of Košice and Bratislava have a specific position on the basis of law, and due to this, they also have city districts which elect their own council and mayor of the said city district. With regard to local elections, other towns have the power to set up committees in the wards of their town, whose members are all councillors elected in the said ward of the town. The powers of the committees are regulated by the statute of the city.

■ According to the 2011 census of Slovakia, more than 50 percent of the population lives in 140 towns (SO SR, 2011). At the same time, according to the Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO, 2017), more than half of public expenditure (current and capital) was expended in 140 towns. Consequently, not only a substantial part of the population lives in 140 towns in Slovakia, but more than half of public resources also goes to them.

■ An LGU is the basic unit of territorial public administration. Although LGUs are formally equal, in reality there are significant differences between them. Although a small LGU (for example up to 1,000 inhabitants) maximises the basic principle of decentralisation - bringing the public policy-making process closer to the citizens – on the other hand, it is not always able to ensure the quality of public services such as a town or city can. The extent of decentralisation of competences, finances and political power is thus largely determined by the LGU's ability to perform the tasks entrusted to it. The findings of the literature based on empirical research confirm that larger units of local government allow a more radical decentralisation of competences (Swianiewicz, 2003, p. 63).

■ According to Swianiewicz et al. (2017) the average size of a territorial unit in Slovakia is one of the smallest in Europe; the average size (per number of inhabitants) fluctuates around 1,900 inhabitants (data for 2014) and is on average 1,850 according to the recalculation from 2013 (Sharapova, 2014). Based

on data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, we know that up to two thirds of Slovak LGUs have less than 1,000 inhabitants, while there are smaller LGUs that also have 10 inhabitants. Tomáš Černěnko and analysts at the Institute of Financial Policy (2017) calculated that by reducing the number of territorial units from 2,933 to 970 local governments could save from 51 million to 181 million euros, which they could invest in better services for residents and development of the LGUs. In the event of an even more significant merger into 160 micro-regions, the annual savings could reach up to 320 million euros.

■ Significant territorial fragmentation in Slovakia and the abovementioned potential savings from the average size of local governments are among the main arguments of the supporters of territorial consolidation in Slovakia. To these arguments we can add the argument about the low level of political competitiveness in those local governments with a small population. According to IFP (2017), the share of mayors and councillors per 100,000 inhabitants in Slovakia is well above the EU average. According to IFP's calculations, Slovakia has a more than 3.5-fold higher share of mayors and a more than 2-fold higher share of local councillors. The above-average number of elected positions, of course, raises the question of competition for these functions. There was zero competition in one out of four LGUs, and only two candidates ran for the mayoral office in one third of local units in 2018 mayoral elections. One of the reasons for the low interest in political positions in small local units is the level of the mayor's salary, which in many cases in small local units only reaches the national minimum wage level; other reasons are: the indebtedness of the LGU, which has no resources for any development and for public services; lack of human capital in the village and the departure of young and dynamic people to larger towns and cities (Sloboda, 2017).

Efforts to address fragmentation

■ A law from 1990 allows LGUs to voluntarily merge into larger units – the so-called LGU associations. However, LGUs do not use this option sufficiently as they usually mainly worry about losing the identity of their LGU. Merger of LGUs could be one of the tools to effectively reduce the debts of small LGUs, which in many cases are so high that they prevent whatsoever any urban development. According to Viliam Páleník from the Institute of Economics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, approximately one third of LGUs in Slovakia survive from hand to mouth and the state regularly gives these LGUs subsidies for the remediation of their property (RTVS, 2014).

■ Klobučník et al. (2018) examined the attitudes of representatives of LGUs in Slovakia to consolidation reforms – merging LGUs into larger units. The sample of answers from approximately 1/3 of all LGUs in Slovakia showed that the representatives of Slovak LGUs perceive possible benefits from the merger of territorial units:

- ▶ saving money – efficiency,
- ▶ increasing the expertise of local government management – reducing the number of administrative staff will create space for quality,
- ▶ increasing the chances for success in applying for subsidies and grants,
- ▶ economies of scale – for example in local government debt management.

■ However, representatives of the polled towns added that only small LGUs should be subject to a merger and any possible merger should be conditional on a successful local referendum. At the same time, they stated that they would like the functionality of the local office as a contact point to be maintained even after the merger of the municipalities.

■ The following negative attitudes against the merger of LGUs were among those expressed by representatives of Slovak towns:

- ▶ not to combine LGUs as a whole, but only the competences of local authorities – the agenda of LGUs,
- ▶ maintain the present status quo and continue to promote inter-municipal cooperation,
- ▶ fear of returning to the so-called model of resort LGUs,
- ▶ under-representation, discrimination against smaller LGUs, rivalry within the newly established LGU,
- ▶ access to local government, distancing self-government and offices from citizens, loss of local identity of local government after their merger.

■ Klimovský et al. (2014) claim that local governments in Slovakia cooperate because they often have no choice – they cannot provide decentralised tasks without cooperation. Often this cooperation is based on the close relationships of local government representatives. However, the authors add that inter-municipal cooperation does not automatically mean cost-effective provision of services.

Financial non-repayable resources of local public administration can in principle have the character:

- ▶ own resources, for example in the form of local fees, local taxes, income from own business, etc.;
- ▶ a share of taxes in state administration, transfer payments and grants from the state budget.

In addition to the abovementioned non-repayable resources, local governments can also draw on repayable resources in the form of credit and loans.

■ Smaller LGUs cooperate in exercising transferred competences in the areas of environment, education, local construction, etc. The existing legal framework allows LGUs to form JMO. It is one of the most common forms of inter-municipal cooperation. According to the Ministry of Interior², there are more than 200 JMOs in Slovakia. In some cases, more than 40 local units cooperate under a common JMO.

Competences – original and transferred

■ Relevant laws define individual competences of local governments, while at the same time competences can be original and transferred (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2013). The transferred competences for LGUs are in the fields of education, environmental protection or, for example, registry management and healthcare. For various reasons, which we present in this chapter, the state has decided to redirect the administration of some areas to lower levels. However, in selected cases, the “Central Authority” retained powers regarding quality standards and the way in which selected competences are fulfilled. Original competence is, for example, competence in the area of administration of local taxes and fees, ensuring local development, management of local property, administration of local roads or, for example, public services. There is more room for innovation in original powers. LGUs and towns, for example, have to provide public transport, and how they do this is to some extent at the discretion of the local authorities themselves. They can set different fare levels, introduce information technology into transport, create a joint transport company with the surrounding LGUs or enter into a contract (contracting) with a private company.

Table 3: Original and transferred competences (areas)

Original competences	Transferred competences
Maintenance of local roads and public spaces	Use of traffic signs, connection of roads, etc.
Waste management and water supply	Construction office
Public order	Registry office
Provision of some social services (e.g. nursery care)	Environmental protection
Establishment of a kindergarten, primary school and school facilities	Establishing authority in relation to primary schools
Management of own or state property	Organisation of elections and referendums
Local taxes and fees, LGU's budget	Population and permanent residence register
Economic activity of LGU (e.g. establishment of local public company)	Establishing authority in relation to healthcare facilities lower type
Certification of documents and signatures on documents	Establishing authority in relation to some social services (e.g. retirement home)
Urban planning	Management of applications for support from the State Housing Development Fund

Source: Authors

² See more at: https://www.minv.sk/?prehlad_SOU

Local governments, small LGUs, as well as larger towns have approximately 4,300 different competences (TASR, 2018). The number itself indicates that the scope of activities and obligations of LGUs in Slovakia, which result from the Act on Municipalities no. 369/1990, is much larger than just a few functions. However, the number of competences and areas of interest of towns and LGUs in Slovakia has not been static over time but has evolved. In general, we can say that the number of duties and rights of local government has expanded since 1998. In particular, 1996 and then the years 1998 to 2005 can be referred to as the years in which public administration underwent significant reform. The adoption of Act no. 416/2001 on the transfer of certain powers from state administration bodies to LGUs and higher territorial units (VÚC) regulates the transfer of powers to LGUs and VÚC.

The Act on the Transfer of Competences from State Administration Bodies to Lower Territorial Units of 2001 only lists a total of 12 areas that are within the competency of LGUs. These are areas such as education (administration of primary and secondary schools), health care (e.g. setting up outpatient clinics), town planning, social assistance (e.g. setting up social services facilities) and roads and regional development. The Act on Municipalities no. 369/1990 Coll. lists another 18 competences of LGUs – from drawing up and approving the budget, deciding on local taxes, setting up budgetary and contributory organisations and ensuring public order. Both laws are further specified by other laws that regulate what LGUs in Slovakia do.

Individual competences can be grouped into six categories:

- ▶ issuing administrative decisions of the local office to natural and legal persons,
- ▶ public policy making,
- ▶ communication with and involvement of citizens in the activities and decisions of LGU,
- ▶ ensuring and provision of public services to the inhabitants,
- ▶ collection of taxes and fees,
- ▶ management of the local office and administration of its property.

The calculation of the competences of small LGUs is comparable to the competences of the mayor of a large town. Small LGUs therefore, due in part to their limited capacity (e.g. human and financial resources), naturally face challenges associated with the quality of their outputs and achieved results, e.g. in the development of the LGU, in investment projects, in the renewal of roads etc. (Klimovský, 2010).

Local finances – fiscal decentralisation

Political decentralisation shifts political power to a sub-central level. Fiscal decentralisation is an important complement to political decentralisation, as funding is needed to exercise the political power conferred on it. The basis of full and effective fiscal decentralisation is the provision of so-called own resources to individual local governments. These are resources that the local government obtains on the basis of law.

After fiscal decentralisation, the system of financing LGUs changed. Five core acts were adopted in order to ensure financial independence and autonomy as well as the real ability “to self-govern”:

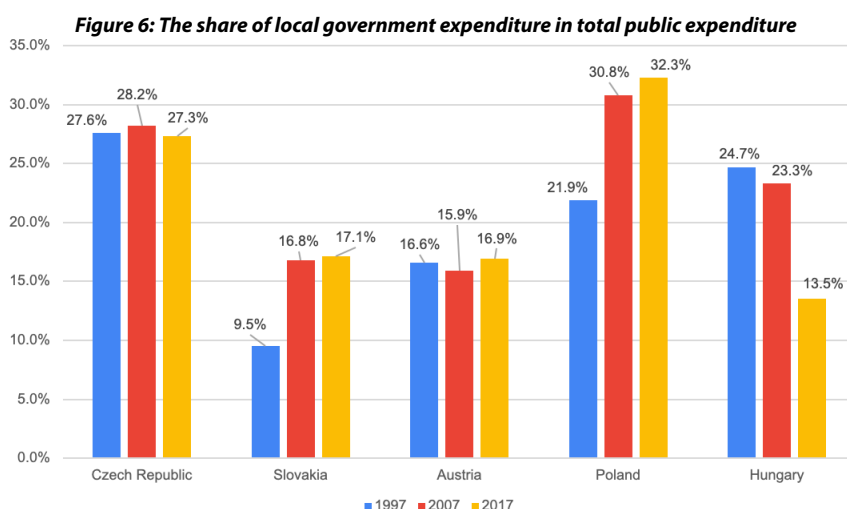
- ▶ Act No. 564/2004 Coll. of Acts on budget determination of income tax yields to regional self-government and on amendments and supplements to certain laws
- ▶ Decree of the Government No. 668/2004 Coll. of Acts on distribution of income tax yields to the local government
- ▶ Act No. 582/2004 Coll. of Acts on local taxes and local charge for local waste and small rubble
- ▶ Act No. 583/2004 Coll. of Acts on budget rules of the local government and on amendments and supplements to certain laws
- ▶ Act No. 523/2004 Coll. of Acts on budget rules of the public administration and on amendments and supplements to certain laws

■ Nowadays, LGUs are financed by two sources: share of personal income tax (70% for LGUs and 30% for regional units) and their own local taxes and fees (100%, mostly waste disposal tax, property tax, accommodation (tourist) tax) (Ministry of Finance, 2017). The share amount of personal income for each LGUs is calculated according to the following coefficient:

- ▶ number of inhabitants with permanent residence in the LGU, of which 57% recalculated by the coefficient of altitude of the LGU (weight 23%)
- ▶ number of inhabitants with permanent residence in the LGU adjusted by the size coefficient of LGU (weight 32%)
- ▶ number of pupils (children) in primary schools and school facilities (40%)
- ▶ number of inhabitants of the LGU who have reached the age of 62 (5%)

■ A continuing problem in the functioning of local governments is the number of competences (original and transferred) whose financing lags behind its need. In 2011, Resolution No. 748 was adopted to carry out a comprehensive audit of the competences of public administration, which, however, was never implemented. Therefore, the real “price” of LGUs functioning stays unknown. The analysis Performance and financing of transferred competences (2019) states that the central government does not reimburse the costs of the performance of transferred competences exercised by LGUs. Hence, LGUs are forced to financially cover the performance of transferred competences from their own resources which could be better used for local development or other original competences.

■ The extent and form of fiscal decentralisation varies from country to country. The following Figure shows the share of the total expenditure of local governments in the total public expenditure of a given country (V4 + Austria), expressed as a percentage of the country's GDP. Over the last 20 years, the share of local spending in total government spending in Slovakia has almost doubled to 17 percent. In other words, approximately every sixth euro that Slovakia spends at various levels on its individual functions is spent at local level and is therefore an expenditure of local governments. Fiscal decentralisation in the V4 region is presented in varying forms. Compared to Slovakia, the ratio of local expenditure to total public expenditure in Hungary is ¼ lower, whereas in the Czech Republic it is ⅓ higher and in Poland it is even higher by almost half. Despite the comparable scope of competences with other EU countries, the share of local government expenditures in Slovakia is only approx. 17.2% of public sector expenditures (the EU 28 average is 23.1%) (Eurostat, 2019)



Source: Eurostat — Total expenditure to other sectors of the economy, as share of general government

Local leadership

■ LGUs at both regional and local level are self-governing units with their own elected representatives. According to the relevant laws *“An LGU makes its own decisions and takes all actions related to the administration of the LGU and its property, all matters falling under its self-governing power based on a special law, unless such actions are requested by law to be taken by the state or other legal or natural person.”* (Act 369/1990, Act on Municipalities) Official local representatives responsible for policy-making processes are:

- ▶ the mayor and local council at local level, both elected directly for 4 years
- ▶ the governor and regional council at regional level both elected directly for 4 years

■ The two local bodies – mayor and local council are mandatorily formed in every LGU in the country. By establishing the relationships between the two bodies as relationships of equality, not subordination, the legislator presuppose that the bodies will cooperate, therefore *“if local administration is to be executed in the interest of the local population, the relationships between the local bodies have to be based on mutual cooperation, not on a “fight” for power and for gaining predominance in the administration of local matters”* (Tekeli 2016). By the division of competences, the Act on Municipalities defines a different character of the two local bodies. While the local council represents a conceptual body, which *“decides on the fundamental issues of the LGU”*, the mayor is an executive as well as an operational body which carries out the decisions made by the local council and deals with the *“common”* administration of the LGU. However, insufficient legal knowledge, as well as different interpretations of which matters belong to *“fundamental issues”* and which to *“common administration”*, often lead to conflict, especially in small LGU (ibid.). Particularly in the case of escalated *“factual”* conflict (how to deal with the local matters), the *“procedural”* conflict (who should deal with the local matters) attaches as well. This conflict between mayor and local council often also reaches the local office when councillors try to resolve conflicts with the mayor through the local office (FG 1).

■ Another difference between the bodies is the level of professionalisation. While the mayor is a full-time position with a proper salary (except in very small LGUs), councillors have regular jobs and only receive reimbursements for their service (Kollárik, 2016).

■ The mayor is also responsible for appointing the head of the local office – Chief Administrative Officer (hereinafter also CAO, *prednosta obecného úradu*), which is a voluntarily formed position. However, the position is not clearly defined (authority, duties, responsibilities) in the legislation (currently, the position is mentioned in one sentence in the Act on Municipalities). According to the former president of the Association of Chiefs of Administrative Offices (professional voluntary association), this position is increasingly becoming a professional managerial position rather than a political patronage reward and as such would deserve a more detailed specification in the legislation.

■ *“CAO is the manager of the office. ... They are the director of the office and are responsible for it professionally and at the same time they have no competences, or only those that the mayor will assign to them. Competences as well as the professional criteria should be directly defined there (by law).”* (Interview 7)

■ *“It is not good that the CAO is not protected by law and the mayor may fire them without the council is not a good thing. The CAO only has to do what the mayor wants them to do.”* (Interview 12)

Results

This section of the TNA consists of five areas:

- ▶ a.) Assessment of local public administration,
- ▶ b.) The most problematic agenda – what does not work,
- ▶ c.) The specifics of performance of self-government,
- ▶ d.) Motivation of officials in local government office,
- ▶ e.) Trainings – current state and room for improvement.

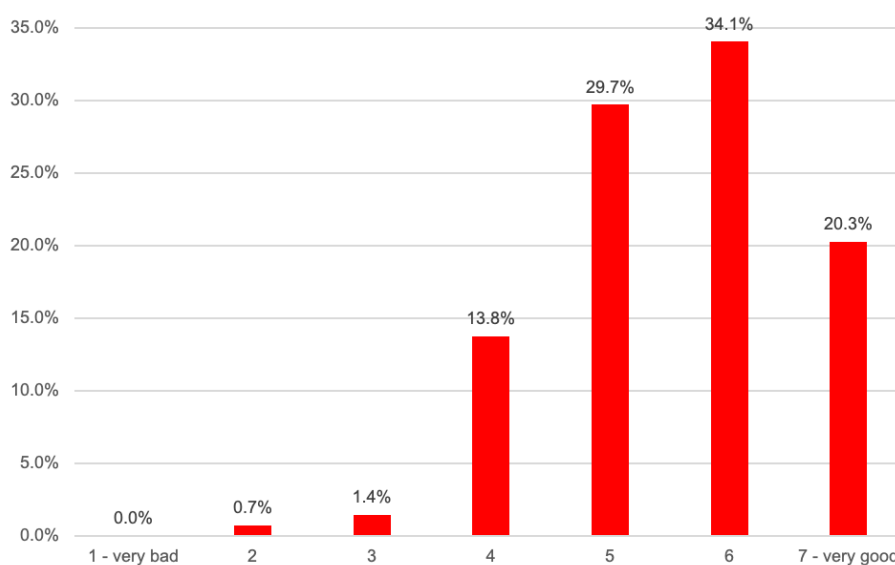
Each of these five areas are structured according to the most relevant findings. The TNA reports and summarises the views and suggestions of respondents resulting from IDIs, FGs and Survey (not the positions of the research team).

ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Assessment of quality of life

In general, the respondents expressed positive opinions about the living conditions in their LGUs (84%). Moreover, the top two boxes on the scale were chosen by more than half the respondents (54%). This result may be due to the positive bias of respondents who are (mostly) executive representatives of LGUs. Negative ratings represented only about 2% of the answers. The assessment of the quality of life varies depending on the size of the LGU. Representatives of smaller units tend to report somewhat more often a lower score of satisfaction with quality of living than larger LGUs.

Figure 7: Place to live



Source: Survey, 2020

General assessment of local administration

■ According to most of the respondents, Slovak LGUs (villages, towns, cities) have real autonomy in decision-making due to the high level of administrative, political and functional decentralisation.

■ Quality of performance is relatively satisfactory, considering the fact that LGUs have hundreds of competences (both original and delegated competences from the central government). Respondents state that they are able to perform competences and activities in a satisfactory manner (in agendas of delegated competences from the central government, if they are adequately funded from the state). However, there are several issues that have a considerable negative impact on the performance of the LGUs, which we discuss in the next section of this chapter.

“I think that the functioning of municipalities in Slovakia is very good, apart from the fact, that they don't have money for anything.” (Interview 15)

■ Changes in financial transparency are perceived to be a positive step compared to the situation in the 90s. Fiscal decentralisation in 2002 enabled higher predictability and transparency of revenues as well as better budget planning. On the other hand, the allocation of finances is still dependent on macroeconomic phenomena, especially on the employment rate, and LGUs would welcome either a higher proportion of income tax or a more flexible mixture of income sources to gain more financial resources.

Assessment of competition and cooperation

■ Healthy competition between LGUs brings positive effects, especially with regard to the development of innovative policies. More than a competition, we could perhaps call it good practices from “neighbours”, whether it be parking policy, innovation in waste management, the promotion of alternative modes of transport, etc. At the same time, these positive examples create pressure from below, as the respondent states.

“We used to compare why council leaders and mayors, why councillors and local authorities indulged someone and in another town they did not do so. We see this, for example, in parking policy, we see it in waste separation, we see it in support of cultural events, when people ask themselves how it is possible that the neighbouring city has indulged more than we have indulged in this town ...” (Interview 23)

■ On the other hand, competition is perceived negatively in some areas, especially in the context of competition for Euro funds and state subsidies. There is a lack of support from the state for inter-municipal cooperation, which leads to the fact that some local self-governments, due to the lack of personnel and professional capacities (related to another problem - fragmentation) are unable to obtain the necessary resources for their further development.

“In the 20 years since the reform of self-government, there are no organisational schemes in any ministries where one of the criteria is inter-municipal cooperation. The vast majority of Euro fund calls are targeted at LGUs and towns as eligible users, but not on associations of municipalities. So, after 20 years, after 5 electoral terms, we have created such local egoism, local envy, instead of emphasising the importance between community cooperation and sharing.” (Interview 23)

■ Inter-municipal cooperation as such is a great challenge for Slovak LGUs in the years ahead. The existing legal framework allows LGUs to form a Joint Municipal Office (JMO) which is one of the most common forms of inter-municipal cooperation. JMOs operate especially in the Eastern part of Slovakia that has the highest share of small local units (with a population below 1,000 inhabitants). JMOs also work as a solidarity instrument – larger local units help small/er local units to carry out transferred competences (e.g. education, local construction office) and/or occasionally also original competences (most often social services).

"... we – bigger villages and towns pull the smaller ones along to make us a bigger whole, and somehow it worked." (Interview 8)

"Joint municipal offices are registered by the Ministry of the Interior; thus, we are addressing economies of scale. I would welcome even more competence to be transferred to those offices because there are many competences that the mayor performs once a year. So, one year it may have been studied and the next it will be forgotten, or something will change." (Interview 9)

■ However, some respondents stress that mayors are still reluctant to "delegate" competences to JMO and prefer to keep it in-house. Cooperation in JMO is often perceived as a "necessary evil".

"... LGUs find it quite difficult to exercise competences together ... everyone probably wants to maintain their territorial scope. It is difficult for us to allow something into the privacy of our village, it's not really done. I can say that this building code is the only such association, but some other joint offices, as the state once thought up, are not very much here yet. Rather, I say that we help each other with that information." (Interview 21)

"In my opinion, the mayors are afraid to pass on competences, which means the LGUs then suffer because the mayor cannot control everything, especially when there are mayors who are not full-time." (Interview 9)

"It would certainly help if LGUs that cooperate with others were favoured, for example, financially over an LGU that does not cooperate. The state should put together a financial scheme for rewarding those LGUs which cooperate according to the number of tasks and local officials." (Interview 11)

■ Respondents indicate that there are some notable deficiencies in their functioning. The most discussed deficiency is the role they can play. They mostly provide draft decisions and administrative support for only a limited number of delegated competences to them and mayors (e.g. education, local construction office – as stated in the quote above) and they do not act as a legal person. The statutory body for each LGU is the mayor, who is legally responsible (by their signature) for all decisions developed by the JMO. This situation seems to be one of the reasons for less interest in forming JMOs.

■ Another form of inter-municipal cooperation is local action groups and microregions. The function of a local action group is usually to advocate in a particular agenda (e. g. environment or transportation). The main purpose of a micro-region is to connect and group LGUs as well as other relevant stakeholders together to attempt to succeed in submitting project proposals in various grant schemes. However, this form of cooperation is still rather sporadic.

■ One of the key factors preventing a greater expansion of inter-municipal cooperation is the lack of support from the state, which we have already mentioned in the competition for subsidies. This lack of support has two faces: financial and methodological.

"... 74% of the mayors in Slovakia in our survey stated that they would enter into inter-municipal cooperation, but they lack methodological help or financial support. It is logical that it is such a percentage, because the vast majority of LGUs have up to 3,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, it would be illusory to think that they have good lawyers or quality economists who will set up contracts and arrange support for them." (Interview 23)

■ According to the respondents, guidelines, including examples of good practice, would provide additional support for creating JMOs.

"... we switched from crowns to euros and left the funding tied to competences from 15 years prior to that, although it is now clear that the competence funding package and many competences have already been moved, but they do not reflect these actions. The second truth is that joint municipal offices still have a major problem related to expertise which is the average age of 54 for two-thirds of employees." (Interview 23)

■ In addition to cooperation between local governments, the research has also shown the need for stronger cross-sectoral cooperation and more intensive networking. It can be said that local governments in Slovakia are very slowly moving towards what is called local “regimes” in American literature. Paradoxically, among the larger LGUs, which are better in terms of their own capacities, we find more frequent examples of such cooperation, for example in the provision of social services (cooperation with organisations that work with the young or homeless) or in caring for the environment (cooperation with initiatives dealing with local interventions in public space). Equally important is more intensive cooperation with the private sector, not only in terms of contracting or other forms of cooperation in the provision of services, but also in terms of gaining inspiration in approaches to management, efficiency and planning.

“... the local government should acquire as many strengths as possible from the private sector and the non-governmental sector. Without many NGOs, towns and municipalities will stumble into several public policies. Social, educational, environmental and similar. It is exactly for this reason why the non-governmental sector cannot be perceived as a rival or competitor, but as a natural partner of local government. The second thing is for the local government to adopt the basic principles of the private sector. No waste and a clear business plan. They are priorities, so we must follow priorities. Where there is waste, we must take measures to prevent such waste.” (Interview 23)

■ Formal cooperation is often one of the conditions for participation in the project or grant call. Therefore, LGUs create formal units whose sole purpose is to submit a project proposal.

“Often, LGUs come together just to meet some formal requirement. LGUs unite, for example, when they go to build water mains, sewers or roads. It is also about economies of scale. It can be an advantage if LGUs have different experiences and then exchange them.” (Interview 9)

■ Based on our findings, the cooperation should also be intensified in the link between local government and citizens. Despite the emergence of a number of civic initiatives in Slovak local governments in recent years, from which even new local politicians have emerged, public involvement is still not up to expectations.

“A municipality should function as a community. Everyone should not rely on the fact that the mayor and councillors will solve everything. Every citizen should somehow give a helping hand.” (Interview 15)

■ In particular, there is a lack of constructive forms of cooperation (involvement in the preparation of decisions and comments), on the contrary, officials and local representatives perceive exaggerated criticism from selected individuals, which is almost the rule in most LGUs and sometimes leads to overcrowding and dysfunction of offices (for example, through the Act on Free Access to Information).

■ The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Slovakia is indeed one of the most liberal in Europe (Školkay, 2015) and many local government representatives would welcome its softening. The state authorities, LGUs and self-governing regions have a duty to provide all information, including their finances (currently it is restricted only to information about their “decision-making activities”) if requested, as well as publish all the contracts and invoices online.

“... Maybe the problem is sometimes in the people themselves that they do not realise how they paralyse the work of the office by all sorts of stimuli (questions, suggestions, etc.). We want to know what's going on, but sometimes people exaggerate... and make an administrative burden.” (Interview 1)

“This (FOIA) is a time-consuming but also difficult barrier for employees.” (Interview 12)

Fragmentation and related problems with capacities

■ The fact that there are almost 3,000 LGUs in Slovakia and each of them, whether it has 50 or 50,000 inhabitants, has the same competences and responsibilities, causes major problems with their governance.

■ Small LGUs (1,000 inhabitants and less) indicate that due to the load of delegated competences and lack of administrative capacity they do not have time to focus on local development. A mayor not only manages the LGU but also delivers services (in some cases) and manages the office. The office of an LGU with less than 500 inhabitants is usually managed by the mayor and one employee (often part-time). Almost 40% of LGUs of Slovakia have less than 500 inhabitants.

"We have about 2,000 inhabitants and three parts to the village, two of them have up to 200 inhabitants, and they always say that they would rather separate from us. I'm saying it's not logical, they can separate, but they won't make a living from that money, they won't even have enough for street lighting. It is one of the logical steps for the local authorities to merge." (Interview 18)

■ The merger of LGUs is largely hindered by the fear of losing identity, as well as the lack of political will and consensus to take such a radical step.

"I am in favour of professional decentralisation – not 2,900 LGUs, but maybe 200 to 300 LGUs in Slovakia. Municipalisation (amalgamation) is needed in Slovakia, unfortunately it has not been talked about for 30 years, because everyone is afraid of it." (Interview 7)

■ However, several fundamental problems of local governments cannot be systematically addressed without a reform that would focus on concentrating the exercise of competences.

"... This puts pressure on expertise and especially in smaller units, as the law does not differentiate competences according to size. When you have a small community, fewer people need to provide the same agenda. ... I think that's the topic. Some joint municipalisation (amalgamation) would be needed for functionality and economy. The whole agenda is not manageable with three or four people." (Interview 6)

"They are just small villages and those mayors are often part-time, often have other jobs but do the same as us." (Interview 8)

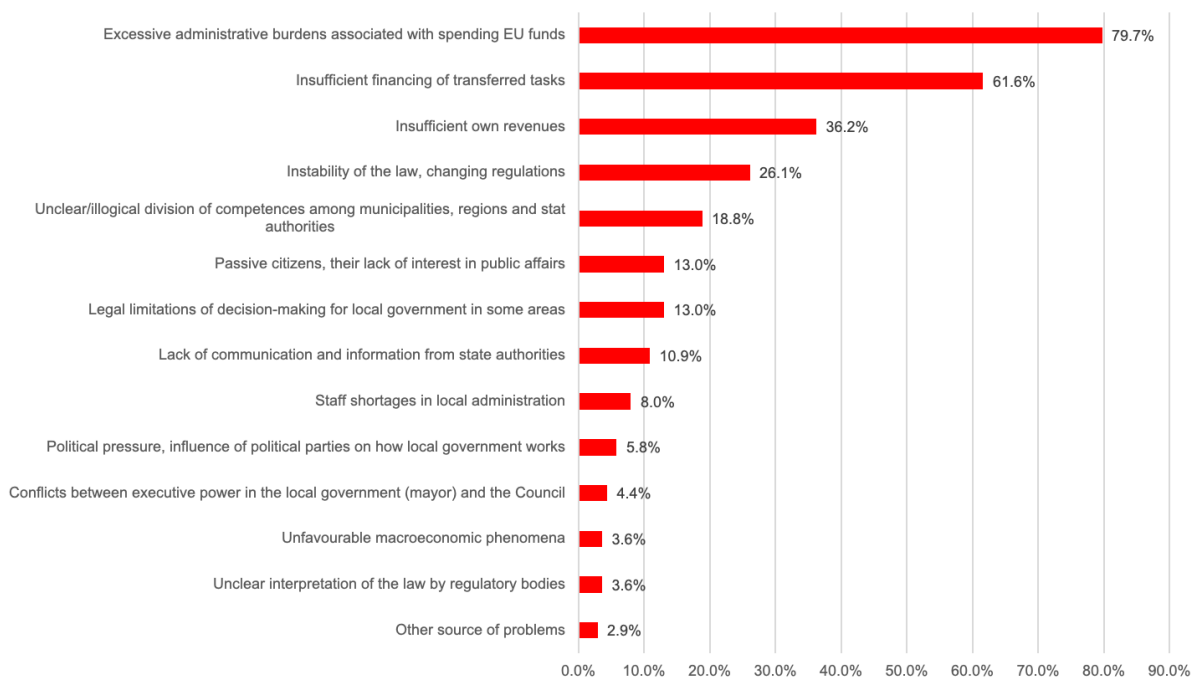
■ Merging LGUs is not the only way, respondents most often talked about the gradation of competences or obligations according to the size of the LGU, greater support for inter-municipal cooperation (see above), or joint offices (also in terms of front offices) with the preservation of original self-governing bodies.

THE MOST PROBLEMATIC AGENDA – WHAT DOES NOT WORK

The survey, IDIs and focus groups brought very similar results in this research area. It can indeed be said that those issues recurring throughout our research are closely linked not only to the general needs of the Slovak LGUs, but also to the needs in regard to training and education of the local administration employees and representatives. However, as the nature of these problematic issues indicate, training cannot be perceived as a universal cure to treat the discovered failures. We will discuss this in more detail in the final section of the analysis.

■ The respondents were asked to indicate up to three major problems which radically impact the governance of their LGU. The three options selected the most all have to do with local finances, but they are followed by other important agenda, such as excessive administrative burdens and instability of the law (see in the following parts).

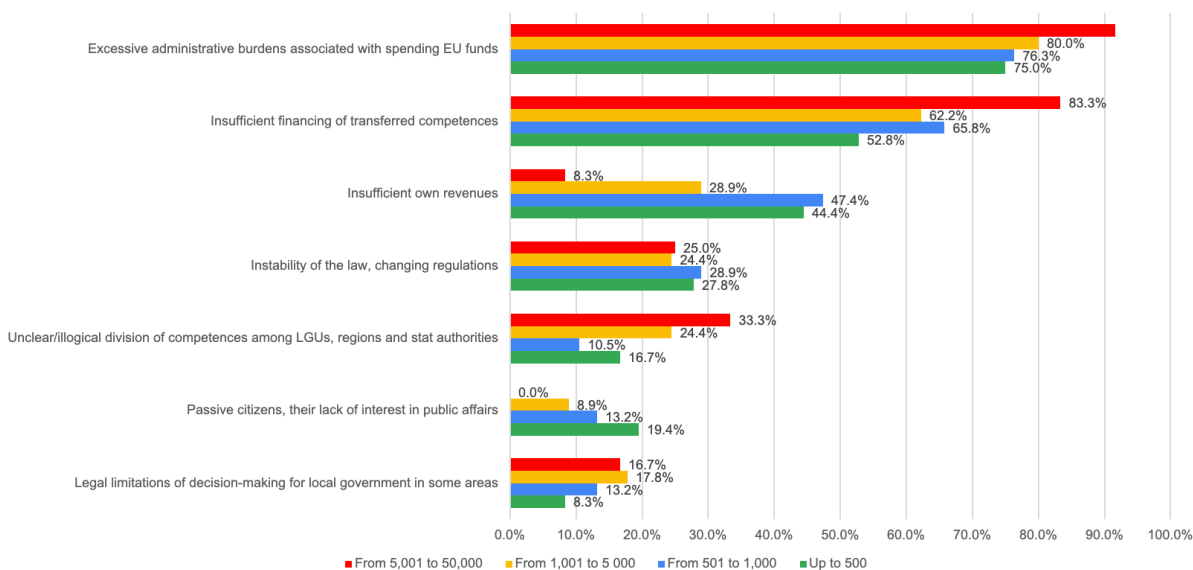
Figure 8: The most problematic areas



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 3 choices

The most problematic areas do not significantly vary depending on the size of LGUs. However, smaller units tend to perceive insufficient own revenues as the third most problematic area while larger units perceive it as one of the least problematic areas. On the contrary, larger LGUs report unclear division of competences and insufficient financial transfers for performance of transferred competences as relatively more problematic areas than smaller LGUs.

Figure 9: The most problematic areas by size of LGU (six most problematic areas)



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 3 choices

Administration of EU funds

■ Three quarters of the survey respondents picked excessive difficulty of the administration of the EU funds as one of the major problems impacting the governance of their LGU. Several respondents in the interview and focus groups argued that due to excessive bureaucracy they rather avoid applying for EU funds completely. This is also a reason why some LGUs outsource the management and development of an application to private companies. A significant number of respondents pointed out that rules related to implementing EU projects defined by the Slovak authorities are far stricter than those originally defined by the European Commission. As a result, LGUs wait even several months for cost reimbursement, which creates serious problems in cash flow.

"... In my opinion, the Euro funds are complicated on purpose so not everyone does them because not everyone has the capacity for it. Thankfully, we are doing well, but I will tell you, sometimes you need to have a head as big as a TV, because there is so much context. We cooperate with an external (private) firm that is responsible for management of the project and proposal. However, they need all the papers from us." (Interview 8)

■ A separate problem is the sustainability of projects from European sources, for which local governments often no longer have the personnel or financial capacity after the projects have been concluded. According to one of the respondents, a possible solution in this case could be closer cooperation between LGUs.

"The success of the LGU is not in obtaining Euro fund money, in implementing the project, but in guaranteeing sustainability. And just as several LGUs can co-finance together because they spread the economic risk, they can also ensure sustainability precisely because they spread the economic risk." (Interview 23)

Insufficient financial transfers accompanying transferred competences

■ Almost two thirds of respondents in the questionnaire mentioned insufficient funding for delegated tasks as one of the three biggest problems. It was also stated several times during the interviews that excessive amounts of transferred competences (approx. 4,500 delegated competences from the state) and insufficient financial transfers accompanying the competences are two of the crucial problems.

■ Respondents in FG3 agreed that local governments must subsidise the exercise of delegated competences at the expense of the original ones (for example, the building authority).

"We do many things that we don't have to and shouldn't do, we do it only for the satisfaction of those we take care of, i.e. the citizen-voter. That is why we do such things and provide such services that are from the money from shared taxes, which should be used for something else, perhaps for further development activity. We use this money to subsidise what needs to be secured beyond our responsibilities." (FG3)

■ According to some of the respondents, the amount of delegated competences is not the crucial problem, in fact in most of the cases, LGUs do not want to give up the delegated competences from the central government. The major problem is a lack of funding for a given competence (e.g. organisation and provision of school meals for every pupil or responsibilities related to the cleaning of pavements).

"... transferring several competences to LGUs is not a problem as long as it is connected with the fact that those LGUs have someone to do it and why they do it. Those villages and towns are closest to the people." (Interview 2)

Insufficient own revenue

■ Insufficient own revenue was reported as one of the three major problems by one third of respondents in the questionnaire. Revenues were often described as a major problem in interviews, particularly in the context of their allocation to employee salaries and the consequent competitive disadvantage in competing for quality workers with the private sector.

“When someone is a good project architect, they are able to earn three to four thousand euros a month. It is very difficult to attract such a worker to the LGU for around a thousand euros...” (Interview 4)

■ In addition to covering the salaries of local government employees, funds are especially lacking in areas with significant investment debt from the past, especially for the renovation of local government buildings (especially school facilities) as well as infrastructure management (comprehensive road and pavement renovations).

Avalanche of new legislation

■ One fourth of the respondents named unstable legislation as one of the three most crucial problems in the questionnaire.

“Other negatives in terms of laws, the legislative whirlwind. Laws are often passed that do not reflect the economic stability of local governments...we see more and more that the laws change 7, 8, 12 times during one electoral term.” (Interview 23)

“Take Euro funds for example, the regulation has changed 6 times. And what was true at the beginning is no longer true at the end.” (Interview 8)

■ Respondents consistently argue that frequent changes of legislation related to local government, the lack of guidelines from ministries or other relevant state public administration bodies, as well as the lack of information, make work difficult. Mayors often learn about the new legislation from television news – there is no systematic dissemination of information about forthcoming changes.

“... we learn about updates only sporadically and we get to the full wording of the law only when performing specific tasks.” (Interview 21)

■ The distribution of guidelines before the new legislation becomes effective is also poor. Methodological instructions are sometimes issued by ministries three months after the legislation has become effective. New legislation and legislation amendments do not take into account actual impacts on local government – there is a missing regulatory impact assessment in this area. Representatives of LGUs feel that their “voice” is not sufficiently heard by the Slovak Parliament and by the Slovak Government. Legislators insufficiently take into account the application practice as well as potential difficulties in the implementation of new legislation.

“No one performs information flow, why would they do a database? No one is interested in doing it, financing it. Part should be done by the state, which methodically directs it to the area of delegated performance of state administration, in the area of self-government it is a matter of agreement.” (Interview 22)

“It is dysfunctional to see in the change of laws when the law will change in December and should be in force from January. It is difficult to adapt mainly to the technical pace of the set legislation.” (Interview 14)

■ Some respondents from smaller LGUs point out that certain legislation interferes with so-called customary law (legal custom as established pattern of behaviour). The community used to participate in the performance of certain competences (e.g. cleaning pavements in front of owners' houses). However, some amendments of legislation (e.g. “pavement act” – obligation to take care of local pavements by local office) interferes with customary law which had been in place for decades (FG 3).

Poor communication of state authorities

■ Representatives of the LGUs perceive that the state authorities (e.g. Slovak Land Fund, state district authorities) do not have sufficient capacities for communication with the LGUs. Sometimes they do not even know who to contact.

“Those systems of individual district offices are cumbersome, in fact you sometimes don't even see e-mails for those individual officials, you can only contact them via the contact form. There should be some simple chat application like in companies where you can open a tree and go from superior and lower to those individual people.” (Interview 1)

■ According to respondents, call centres are often too busy to answer, and no one is responsible for consultation with LGUs (e.g. to offer consultation or clarify the implementation of the new legislation, as stated in the previous point). Ministries are focused on their own specific agenda and any demands from LGUs are referred to the MoI whose employees often lack the relevant knowledge.

“Some time ago, there were methodological manuals on how to apply this (law) in practice. Now, you don't even have someone to ask.” (Interview 7)

■ The role of the state in the dissemination of information is at least partially replaced by ZMOS and some private companies that offer information services in this area for a fee.

“We send all these outputs, including early intervention. The law has changed, there is a new decree, the methodology has been changed. Here you go. It shows up in your mail and it is assumed that this will reduce the number of decisions that either ignore the law or decisions that are in conflict with the amended legislation.” (Interview 23)

Illogical division of competences

■ Many competences are not logically and comprehensively divided among LGUs (obce), state district authorities (okresy) and regions (VÚC), which is considered to be one of the three major problems for more than 18% of the respondents in the questionnaire. For example, within the environmental agenda, a district office approval is required for cutting down a tree, although the environmental agenda itself is within the delegated competences of the LGUs. In a lot of such cases, LGUs have to wait for decisions (formal permits and such) from other authorities, which consequently prolongs the process of carrying out their competence.

“... there is a big problem with waste, illegal dumpsites and the like. Ministries often throw competences on our shoulders and district environmental authorities are not cooperating with us. On the contrary, we sometimes fight over who owns the problem and so on.” (Interview 1)

■ At the same time, many people are not aware of multi-level governance and therefore are unable to distinguish between different levels of government – local, regional, national and subnational. This often creates conflict and tensions between citizens and the LGUs.

“People do not perceive the difference between competences - what the city should do, what the region should, and so on. They want everything right away and do not perceive that the installation of a road sign takes a very long time. We can only do what is permitted by law.” (Interview 6)

“A citizen does not know this management system and it is not clear who is responsible for what. It has no logical arrangement.” (Interview 19)

Digitalization and e-government

■ There is a poor execution and a lack of support from the state in the digitalisation agenda. According to the majority of respondents, digitalisation causes more problems than benefits. It requires extra financial resources to buy hardware and software. The nationwide public provider of cloud services and IT interface DEUS/DCOM allegedly fails to provide sufficient support, meaning both regular user-support as well as support in the case of system malfunction. When the system does not operate properly, the users have no one to consult. According to the respondents, the provider does not provide training for employees in LGUs at a sufficient level.

“DEUS/DCOM has its logicity for small communities. But their capacities are often fully occupied. Towns still have their own information systems, but the state decided to support only DEUS/DCOM? ... another problem is the impotent Slovensko.sk (national e-gov portal)” (Interview 19)

“The problem of digitalisation starts in the offices, the people there do not understand the workings, they have not been trained to use them, they use software without a license. Slovensko.sk does not work. When you have to connect to the registry office there, it doesn't work. We want to do something, so we have to have a program that I don't know who has, so the activity has to go through them. The state should ensure this comprehensively.” (Interview 18)

■ Representatives of DEUS/DCOM argue that they provide everything that the LGUs have to do according to the law on e-government. Trainings and technical support are, in their words, broadly accessible and they see the problem more in the lack of interest on the part of the LGUs themselves. Another problem they mentioned is technical knowledge lacking in a significant portion of the local administration employees who are not able to make use of all of the functions of the DCOM system, regardless of the manuals, trainings and instructions provided.

■ Problems with the adaption of the officials to the electronic services was also mentioned by several respondents in the interviews. The older generation are accustomed to routine procedures and have a particular problem with the transfer of the processes from paper form to the new software programs.

“There were also employees who retired early or left their job because of the digitalisation.” (Interview 4)

■ E-government services are hard to use, and digitalisation is often perceived as an extra burden for LGUs because certain services also have to be delivered online as well as in paper form (for official purposes and to archive documents).

“Digitalisation works here by having to send it electronically and also in writing. That is “via Košice” (meaning illogical, pointless). I'm not going to say how many times the system crashed.” (Interview 20)

“In recent years, we have gained an agenda starting with compulsory electronisation ... a reduction of obligations on the part of citizens, but an increase on our part, for example, when entering various registers...” (Interview 2)

“Electronisation complicates office life. Double the work. Both paper and electronic forms are needed, because not every institution accepts an electronic form, but on the other hand, the law requires it (to communicate electronically).” (Interview 14)

“X things could be done electronically, but many things still need to be printed. Either let's do it electronically, or don't do it, because it's a hassle for the worker to do it both ways” (Interview 7)

■ However, a separate problem is that not even many citizens communicate with the local authority electronically. One of the reasons why people do not use electronic communication is its complexity and the distrust, and high costs for the older generation of people in acquiring skills to work with electronic services. This can also put these people at a disadvantage and make it more difficult for them to access services.

"A minimum of people use electronic services. ... A colleague came up with the idea that we would campaign that people would see these are the things that can be solved electronically, it's easy, you don't have to go anywhere. What people rather remember is that they don't have to carry an extract from the cadastre. Great, so since January, you don't have to carry a school attendance confirmation. That's all well and good... but there's still a lot of things where they don't have to go to the office at all, but those people aren't that active (meaning well-informed) in such matters." (Interview 2)

"And within the informatisation (digitalisation), we identified the problem that the obligation of electronic communication with the state will create a group of excluded people. Not everyone has the Internet or a computer, and this cannot be commanded by law." (Interview 19)

■ On the other hand, several respondents stated that step-by-step, the e-government area is being improved and that the situation is definitely better than when it was introduced. However, considering the resources invested in e-government, they would definitely expect more radical moves towards its smooth functioning..

".. when local governments started to connect, it was not possible to connect during the morning and it was not possible to send documents because it was constantly crashing. It was overloaded. They are gradually finishing it, improving it, but the beginnings were difficult." (Interview 5)

"The further on, the better it gets. It moves with such slow steps. For example, when your child was born – you had to go there, there, there, there ... now we do it in our village, we arrange everything here at the registry office, we send data online, we are connected by the police, or by population records, etc." (Interview 8)

Performance of transferred competences – especially the building authority and education

■ Most of the respondents in the interviews and focus groups noted that financial transfers from the state for transferred competences are not sufficient for providing the required quality of services so LGUs cover most of the costs related to this service from their own budget. Some agenda (construction office, education, etc.) is very technical and requires skilled and educated employees who demand salaries comparable to the (local) private sector. LGUs have limited capacity to compete for human resources on the labour market with the private sector (see more in Motivation of officials in local government office).

■ Issuing of planning permits is a delegated competence from the central government to Local Construction Offices (Miestne stavebné úrady), falling under the authority of local government offices. This agenda is received as one of the most complicated while local representatives do not have any real chance to influence the outcome. They have to strictly follow the procedures as prescribed by the law.

"It came to our notice then that we had a serious lawsuit regarding a small hydroelectric plant. And we, as an LGU, could not prevent the issuance of a building permit. It is nice to say that you have the competence, but the law puts constraints on you..." (Interview 21)

"The whole agenda of the building authority is the performance of state administration ... There is a building law and other interwoven regulations and it is all strictly regulated. From the outside, it may seem that the building authority belongs to the LGU and the mayor, because he must sign every decision or whatever is going on there,

but in fact he has no real impact on what the building authority does or does not have to approve. Because as soon as an investor meets the requirements set by law, meaning also that it is not in conflict with the local plan (general town plan), there is no possibility to act, whether the LGU wants or does not want such a building there. ... At the same time, this delegated performance of state administration is significantly underfunded.” (Interview 2)

■ Another transferred competence is education (preschools and primary schools). Here, many respondents indicate troubles in exercising this competence due to a significant investment gap and high capital and human costs.

“Although many mayors say they have been fighting for education for a long time, now it is about the mayor fighting over money with the school principals. Schools are like bottomless pits, they spend as much as they get, we “fight” for every thousand euros. I think that education should be under state control, also for accounting purposes.” (Interview 18)

“We have taken over education as such with huge shortcomings, because the state has not really taken care of the buildings at all in recent decades... And there were simply such huge shortcomings in terms of the equipment of kindergartens but also the technical equipment of buildings - buildings are leaking, windows were not replaced, so we simply had to accumulate a huge amount of funds in this area from our own resources ... These huge problems have not been tackled over a long period of time and now they cannot be solved overnight, maybe not even in ten years.” (Interview 4)

■ The facts mentioned above mean that a lot of LGUs would rather give up these competences – mostly the local building authority but in some cases education as well (provided that the state would compensate LGUs for their investments in the school infrastructure) and transfer them back to the state authorities.

Complicated public procurement

■ The legislation defined by the central government to conduct purchases makes each procurement a time-consuming process with an uncertain conclusion. LGUs are afraid (culture of scandals and frauds) of an audit from Supreme Audit Office and/or Office for Public Procurement. LGUs would welcome simpler rules and/or guidelines in public procurement

“We have to outsource this thing (public procurement) every time, which is holding us back. We are now going to address this by hiring an employee who will be explicitly devoted to public procurement or project management in general.” (Interview 1)

“The bureaucracy is unbelievable here. Just imagine, one pencil that costs ten cents and to buy it you need to fill in four forms that exceed the value of that pencil.” (Interview 17)

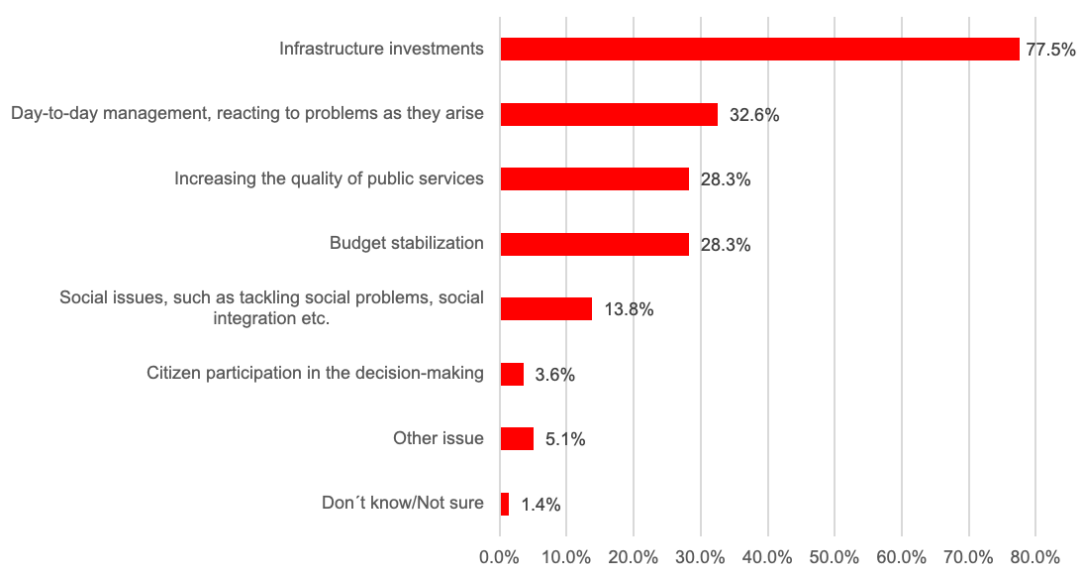
THE SPECIFICS OF PERFORMANCE OF SELF-GOVERNMENT

Priorities of LGUs in Slovakia

When looking at the performance of LGUs, it is desirable to first know what are the current priorities of their leadership. For example, it would probably be pointless to assess the performance of LGUs based on their efforts to include citizens in the decision-making process if they invest most of their resources in revitalising or building new infrastructure. With this in mind, we wanted to obtain at least a basic picture of what it is that Slovak LGUs strive for and ask the respondents to indicate a maximum of two priorities of their LGU.

The answers have a clear “winner” with infrastructure investments being determined as one of the two priorities in the current electoral term by more than 73% of the respondents. This was followed by routine management and response to problems as they arise (over 33%), budget stabilisation (over 30%), improving the quality of public services (over 27%) and social issues (over 13%). Other responses did not even reach the 10% threshold.

Figure 10: Priorities of LGUs



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 2 choices

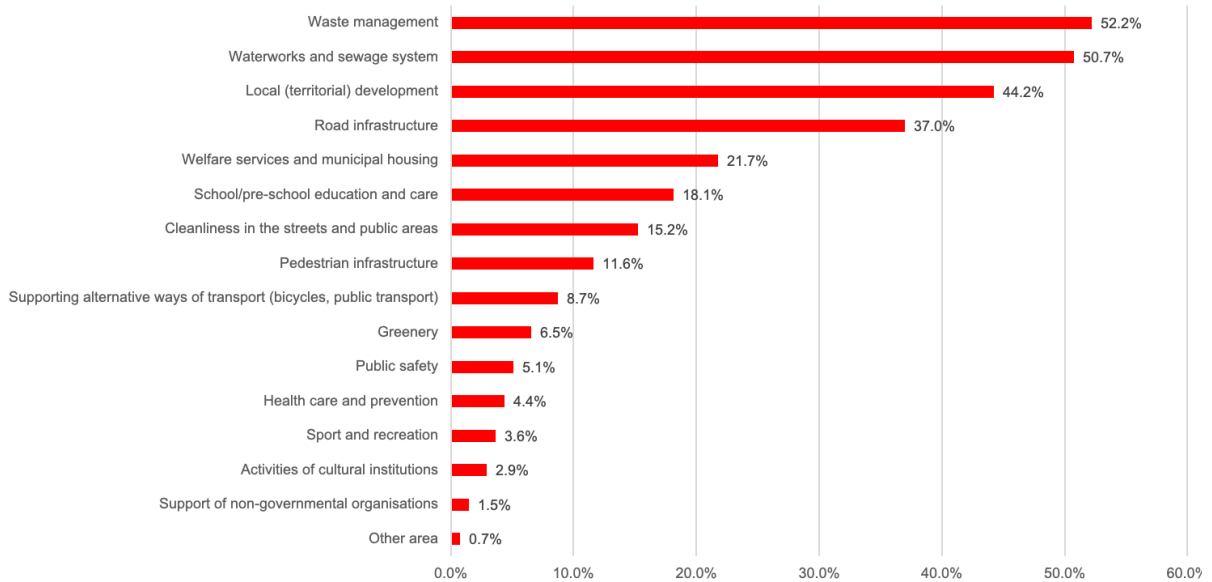
These results indicate that insufficient capacities caused by a fragmented system and investment debt from the past have put LGUs rather in a position of “caretakers” at the expense of new projects and innovations. Only in less than 5% of cases did the respondents indicate “another matter important for the locality” as a priority – e.g. employment of disadvantaged job seekers or environmental protection were mentioned.

As we can also see, the involvement of citizens in public policy-making and decision-making processes is not perceived as a priority (4%). This may be due to the fact that in small LGUs, feedback from citizens already takes place in a natural way, directly at meetings with the mayor and councillors. However, in larger LGUs, citizens are often not involved beyond their normal legal obligations.

“We have introduced a Message for Mayor (online app), we are trying to get feedback. At the moment, however, we do not have a system that would give us feedback on the extent to which people are satisfied with our work. The mayor started meeting citizens of the individual local districts and trying to gather suggestions.” (Interview 6)

Similar results were achieved when we asked which specific areas should be prioritised in the conditions of their local government. The first three places were occupied by waste management, water supply and sewerage network and territorial development of the village. These areas also suggest that local governments in Slovakia are dealing with investment debt from the past and “new” topics such as greenery, support for alternative modes of transport, or support for civic initiatives are still significantly at the expense of the basic “bread and butter” areas where local government functioning is necessary.

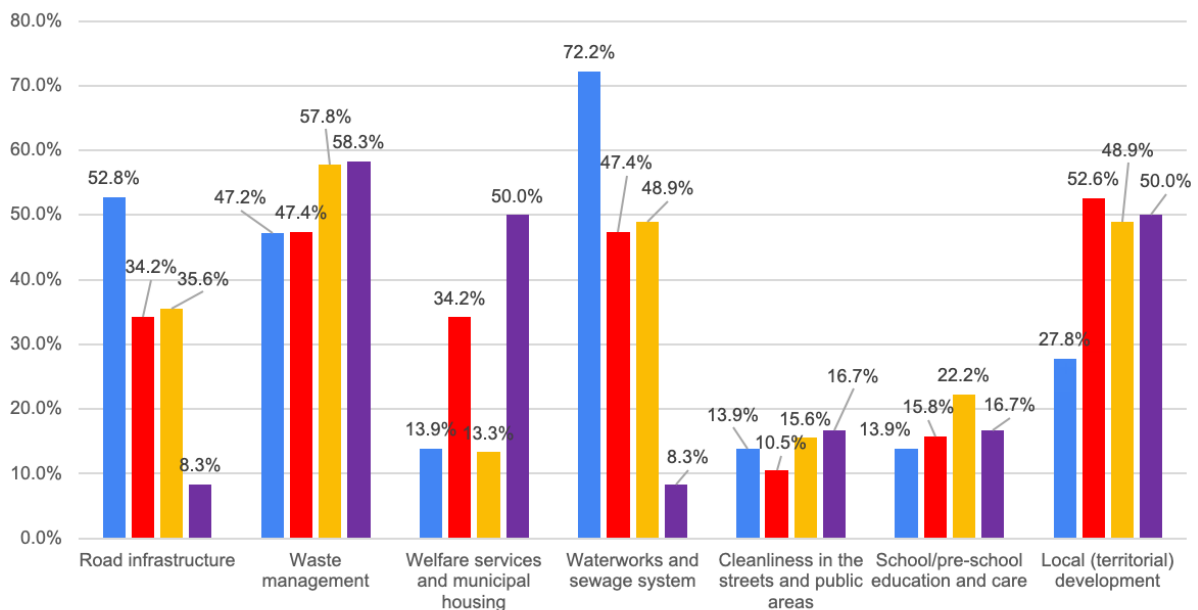
Figure 11: Areas which should be prioritised



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 3 choices

There is some variance based on the size of the LGUs. The smallest LGUs report that they want to prioritise more on investments in the infrastructure (roads, sewage system) – presumably because they still have parts of their areas not connected to local infrastructure at all and on the other hand, do not have the capacity to prioritise local development or social services (or they do not provide any social services) as the larger LGUs do. Waste management is perceived as a priority regardless of the size of the LGU.

Figure 12: Areas which should be prioritised according to size of LGU



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 3 choices

The interviews also raised a specific issue regarding priorities, namely their instability. The relatively short electoral term (4 years) and the ongoing “generational change” in the positions of mayors in many LGUs result in frequently changing priorities, which may ultimately hamper the overall development of an LGU.

“... local governments often change their priorities after elections. And I see this in the case of candidates for councillors or for mayors. They have only just started running for office and are already making promises without knowing the economic reality and sustainability and these are often promises that are in stark contrast with the strategy documents.” (Interview 23)

Additionally, the changes in leadership, priorities and modes of work are often a great challenge for the local government officials, especially for those who have worked at the local government office for a lot of years and have been used to certain ways of the operation.

“The challenge is also to force people (employees) to change their way of thinking, there is often a problem with resistance. People have been used to a system of work and need to be motivated not to perceive change negatively.” (Interview 6)

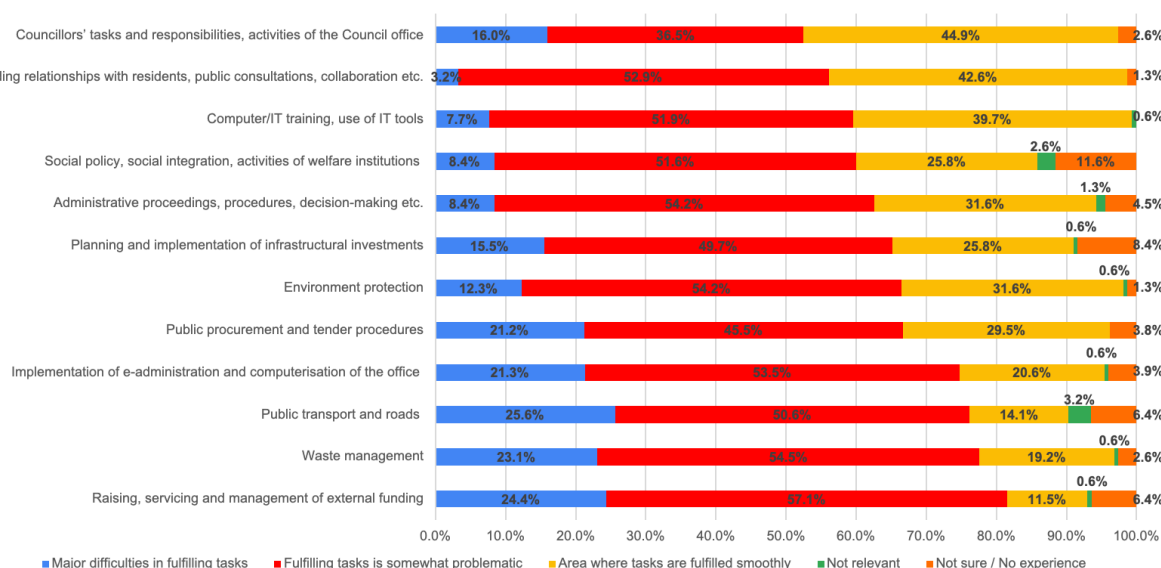
Performance in individual areas

We looked at the performance of local governments in the survey from two perspectives. One is the performance of local governments in specific areas of decision-making in local government, the other is specifically the performance of local officials.

The areas that could be categorised into the basic management of the office were the best in terms of performance evaluation – the management of working hours of local officials and the organisation of work at the office itself. Around 85% of respondents consider the fulfilment of both of these areas to be unproblematic.

Conversely, on the other side of the spectrum, we can find fundraising and management from external sources (only 11.5% consider it seamless), transport and infrastructure (14%) and waste management (19%). At the same time, these areas were most often identified as those in which performance is accompanied by significant problems. Other frequently identified problem areas also correspond to our previous findings – whether it is the implementation of e-government and electronic office, public procurement, social policy, or administrative proceedings.

Figure 13: The most problematic areas (top 12)



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to sort by degree in terms of the fulfilment of tasks (major difficulties in fulfilling tasks, fulfilling tasks is somewhat problematic, area where tasks are fulfilled smoothly, not relevant, not sure / no experience)

■ If the respondents described the fulfilment of any of the areas as very problematic, we also asked for justification in the questionnaire. In the area of transport and infrastructure, the lack of funding associated with investment debt in infrastructure management is clearly the most perceived problem.

“These projects have been underfunded for a long period of time even though they should be one of the priorities, it is impossible to finance the improvement of the situation from share taxes and our income.” (Survey, 2020)

■ Concerning obtaining and managing funds from external sources, respondents draw particular attention to the excessive bureaucratic burden of the processes. Several respondents also identified clientelism in the allocation of funds as a problem and the consequent impossibility of obtaining resources for their local government. Respondents most often identified excessive bureaucratic burdens as a problem also in connection with public procurement processes.

■ According to the respondents, waste management is marked mainly by the poor approach of citizens to waste management – whether it is a low rate of separation or the creation of illegal waste dumps. Respondents also mention capacity problems due to the extensive obligations that they have under the law in this area.

■ In the case of e-government and electronic office, respondents pointed in particular to its complexity (time, professional and financial). Electronisation is particularly problematic for small LGUs, which often have a poor internet connection thereby preventing them from properly performing their duties in this area.

Performance of the local administration officials

■ Regarding the performance of officials, respondents are particularly satisfied with the level of their expertise, the overall quality of their work, their ability to work as a team and the quality of services provided to citizens. On the contrary, the worst perceived by the respondents are the motivation of officials to increase their professional qualifications, the commitment and work motivation of officials and the innovative thinking of officials in solving problems.

■ Respondents agree that in general the performance of the officials is satisfactory. The officials are mostly experts in their fields, but if there are problems, they usually stem from a lower level of autonomy in decisions (not assuming responsibility for their decisions/delegating decisions to the mayor) and lack of soft skills such as time management or communication skills. A mixture of older and younger employees is perceived as having positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of work of the office.

■ The employees do not have specific time in the schedule for brainstorming, data analysis and creativity in terms of process improvement. Due to the high workload they do not have slack – space to support creativity as part of their normal work hours/week to work on innovation.

“Employees do not have systematic time set aside for innovation. But they are encouraged to do so.” (Interview 6)

“Stereotype and monotony are killing them. We do not have the capacity for rotations within the office. I am glad that I can provide basic services when someone is on holiday... On the other hand, if they have time to light a cigarette outside, they have time for everything else (respondent laughs). It's not really that terrible. If you want to be proactive, you can.” (Interview 2)

“Every employee has the space to do what they want within the law, to train in what they want to. The form of brainstorming still works. We meet every morning.” (Interview 12)

■ It can be said that the basic performance indicators are at a good level and thanks to this, local governments are able to provide services at a satisfactory level, even in demanding (legislative and financial) conditions. On the other hand, the lack of motivation and innovative approaches to problem solving points to reserves that may be related both to the nature of work in local authorities (monotony and strict “structuring” of tasks based on legislative obligations), but also to reserves in financial evaluation and inability to compete with the private sector.

“When I compare it to the private sector, here in local government office there is too much bureaucracy and alibism for employees who do only what they have to do to avoid any mistakes. They lack the motivation and effort to do something beyond what is necessary.” (Interview 16)

Self-assessment and performance analysis of officials

■ An interesting piece of information is that a minimum of local governments does some form of self-assessment; this was mentioned by only four LGUs in the questionnaire, while only one used a professional tool (CAF). Again, this phenomenon can be attributed to the size of the offices, as these tools only make sense with a larger number of employees.

■ Analysing the performance of officials can also generally be described as unsystematic. The answers to the questionnaire show that at least some form of evaluation is conducted in two thirds of local governments, of which to a greater extent on an irregular and informal basis (55%), or regularly but informally (24%). Only in about 15% of cases is it a systematic and formalised form of performance analysis in terms of regular and formal evaluations or audits.

“... the head of the department, someone in charge, I expect them to have an overview of their people...” (Interview 2)

■ It is very important to evaluate the employees based on their performance – failing that, the motivation of the most efficient employees decreases. However, as already mentioned, the monitoring of performance (performance assessment) is usually informal and not done in a regular and predictable way.

■ The performance of employees is usually evaluated by the heads of individual departments and sections and then these evaluations (written, verbal) are passed on to the mayor, sometimes with a proposal of rewards or personal appraisals. Some, especially larger local governments, have internal guidelines in place for employee appraisal. However, the evaluation is often not formalised also due to the time capacity of managing employees and the perception of this tool as not very important.

“We have a formalised evaluation of employees by the heads of departments (introduced by an internal directive). Managers evaluate and present this evaluation to the mayor. However, they have more or less no motivation or remuneration or the time for formal evaluation interviews.” (Interview 14)

“Evaluating the performance of an administration is very difficult, and although we have tried it in different ways, it is challenging because every employee is different. We haven't done it for about 4-5 years. We evaluate employees twice a year when allocating remuneration. The criteria are determined by the chief of the office. These are performance evaluations, for example. We follow our own rules of remuneration.” (Interview 12)

■ Some local governments have also introduced ISO standards. In general, these standards are perceived as a form of prestige of the town and also as an opportunity to improve processes. On the other hand, it puts pressure on data management at the local authority.

“Even though it’s extra work, it makes sense. It’s prestige for the town. Data backup has been improved and another position in the human resources department has been negotiated thanks to an internal audit. ... Colleagues evaluate it (ISO standard) negatively. In order to fulfill it, employees also have to report some data on a quarterly basis, and they do not see this as necessary and meaningful.” (Interview 14)

The needs of local governments with regard to the performance of local authorities

As one of the two most pressing needs, up to 40% of respondents ticked off sufficient technical equipment at the office in the questionnaire. This answer should be seen in the context of two possible meanings – not only the hardware itself, e.g. new computers, but also software that facilitates the exercise of competences. The importance of both meanings was also confirmed by the interviews..

“Regarding the digitalisation, I found the office in a prehistoric state. For example, our employees did not have mobile phones...We did not even have any backups and to this day we make backups only to external hard drives, there is no server. I ordered analysis of the security of the system. We do not have software programs, we have programs for households, even though the security level should be somewhere else.” (Interview 18)

Figure 14: The most pressing needs with regard to the performance of LGUs



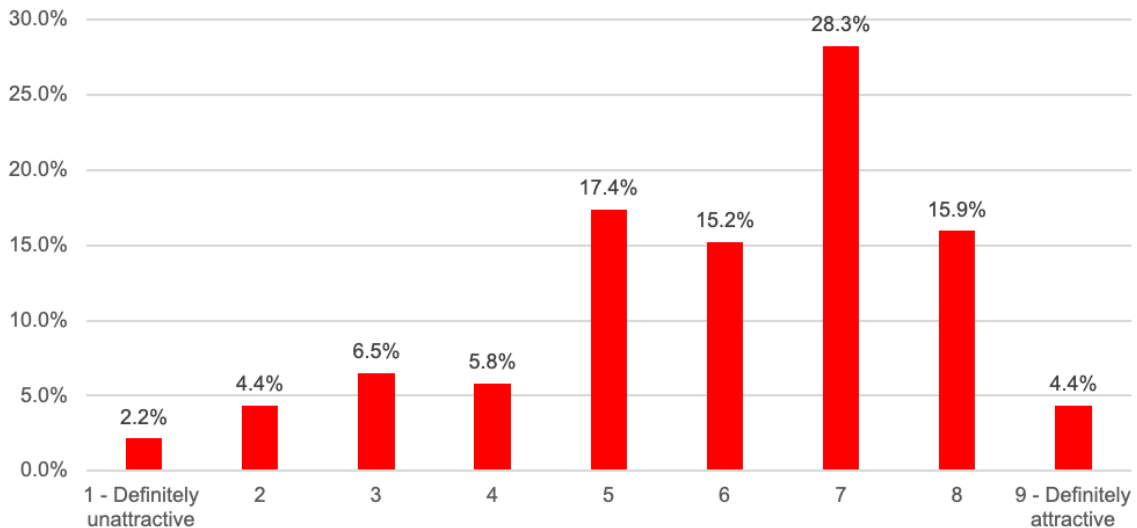
Source: Survey, 2020— Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 2 choices

The answers to the questionnaire confirmed, likewise mentioned in the interviews, the problem with the personnel capacities at the offices. A quarter of respondents identified the increase in the number of officials as one of the two key needs. This was followed by an increase in salaries (19%) and an increase in the competences of officials (16%).

MOTIVATION OF OFFICIALS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICE

Most respondents believe that local administrative employees are fairly satisfied with their jobs. Approximately one out of five respondents perceive employment at the local government office as unattractive. The respondents from small LGU with less than 500 inhabitants most often indicated that employment at the local government is unattractive. It can be due to the amount of agenda (workload), very limited financial resources to employ full-time employees, etc. On the contrary, LGUs with 500 to 1,000 and from 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants reported the most positive opinions regarding the attractiveness of employment at a local government office.

Figure 15: Attractiveness of job in local government



Source: Survey, 2020

Attractiveness of work at a local government office

The most important mentioned motivational factors regarding employment in a local government office were the vicinity (from home to work), job stability and level of remuneration. Wage level is also one of the biggest constraints for hiring good quality employees who can prefer higher salaries in private sector.

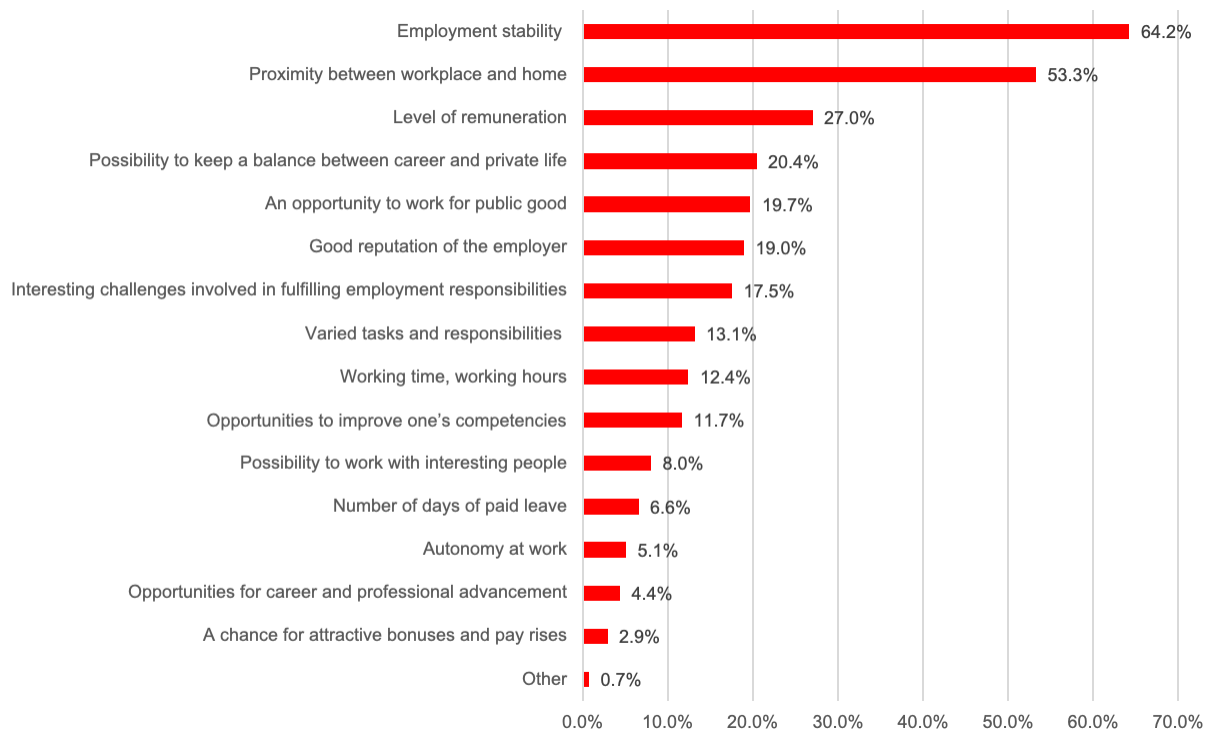
"Sometimes I would hire a better candidate, but if I'm not able to pay them, I have to cook with what I have." (Interview 4)

"...there are people here, that does not have 1,000 EUR net, not even with the 13th pay. We are not able to attract high-quality people in this situation. Sometimes you need to work with what you actually have. But it's really worth hiring young people. Older people are often burned-out and have their routines. We created a new organisational structure recently and for the last few months we have observed an increase in productivity." (Interview 16)

Low salaries (especially compared to similar positions in the private sector), excessive critique by the citizens – oftentimes personalised towards the officials, low or non-existent career advancement opportunities, small room for innovation and excessive bureaucracy are perceived to be the barriers to employment in a local government office.

"... We have a problem filling technical positions. There is a problem in remuneration as it does not take into account what it does. It is simply a public servant under the law 553." (Interview 6)

Figure 16: Factors which influence attractiveness of employment in a local government office (staff)



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to select up to 3 choices

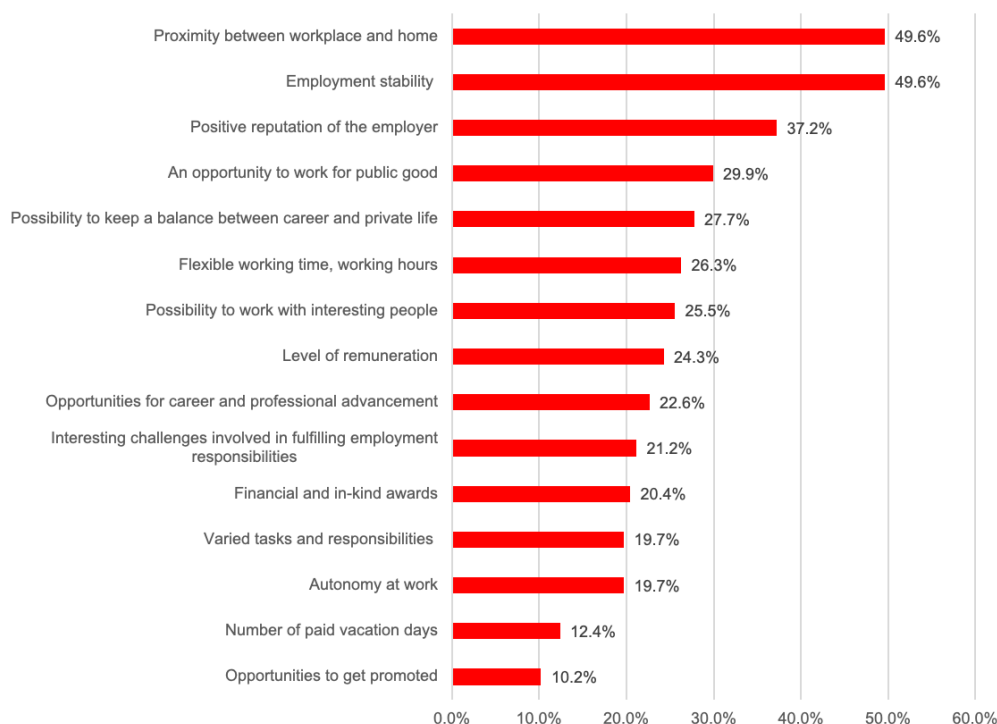
Another relevant factor that influences the attractiveness of employment in a local government office is the possibility to keep a balance between career and private life which goes together with shortened working hours. An opportunity to work for the public good, good reputation of the employer and interesting job responsibilities are quite often mentioned factors.

“In addition, we offer discounted tickets to the theatre and to the swimming pool. And the collective agreement determines entitlement to a 13th salary, an extra week of holiday, 37.5 hour working week.” (Interview 6)

We see opportunities for career and professional advancement, autonomy at work or opportunities for attractive bonuses among the factors which are, according to the respondents, irrelevant for the attractiveness of local government employment. The possibility of earning additional income is presumably perceived as unlikely. Interestingly, respondents perceive extended vacation (extra days off) as irrelevant for the attractiveness of local government employment. By default, this may be due to a high number of days of holiday in public and state administration.

The respondents were also asked to indicate the factors which, in their opinion and for them personally, influence the attractiveness of local government employment. The responses follow the indicated factors from the previous question. Again, the most important factors are proximity between work and home (95% of respondents live in the same LGU in which they work), job stability, opportunity to work for the public good, good reputation of the employer. However, a significant change is that respondents (mayors mostly) perceive the level of their remuneration as a relatively less important factor influencing the attractiveness of their job than it is in the case of their employees.

Figure 17: Factors which influence attractiveness of employment in local government (respondents – mayors mostly) – the most important factors



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to sort the factors which influence the attractiveness of employment in local government (for them personally) by importance (the most important, important, moderately important and least important). The figure shows the most important factors.

Motivational factors for higher engagement of employees in local government offices

Put in a simplified way, the employees of local government offices can be divided into three principal groups:

- ▶ Officials who are enthusiastic about the job, who take their job as a mission.
- ▶ Officials who are frustrated by the (increasing) pressure related to their performance or by critical citizens.
- ▶ Officials who have problems adapting to new trends (digitalisation, new methods, etc.), most often senior employees and/or employees from technical departments (e. g. tax collection).

Each group of employees can be motivated to perform better.

Quality of social relationships in the office – a good atmosphere at the office, good relationships and cooperation with the supervisor as well as other colleagues (departments) – is among the most important motivating factors. The results of data analysis suggest that the right attitude among the management may be an important factor influencing the atmosphere and efficiency of the work, especially in situations where other employee motivation tools are very limited.

Level of remuneration, financial bonuses or performance appraisal are also among the top 10 most important factors. Financial incentive is perceived as an important cornerstone of work in local government.

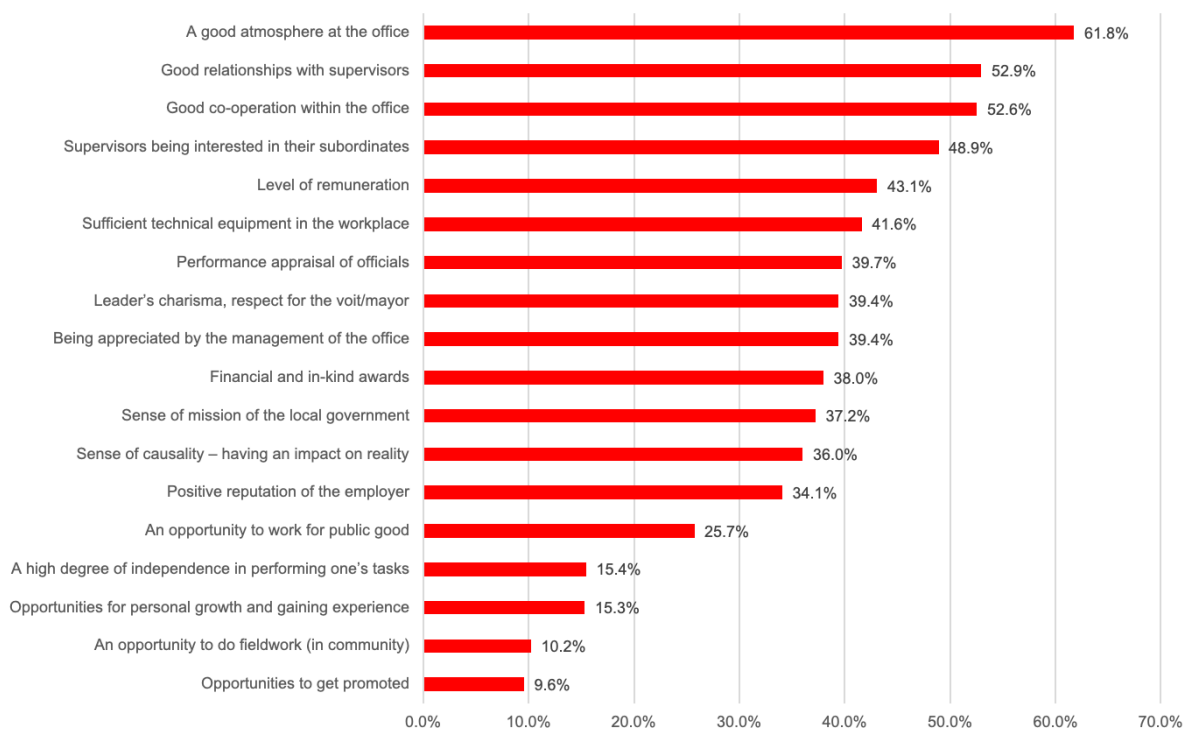
“Everyone expects remuneration for their work in the first place. So the financial incentive must be there for one to perform better.” (Interview 15)

“It's not just a financial reward, although it will probably please the most.” (Interview 17)

Again, however, there are more important factors that may motivate staff to get engaged and work better. Also, some respondents in FG and IDI mentioned that the role of a good head of department is key to motivating employees. One of the local governments involved conducts an employee satisfaction survey every two years. The results show that salary is important but not the most important factor in the level of satisfaction of officials.

“Employees are motivated to do whatever is necessary if they have a good boss.” (Interview 14)

Figure 18: Factors which may motivate staff to get engaged and work better – the most important factors



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were asked to sort by importance (the most important, important, moderately important and least important) factors which motivate staff to get engaged and work better. The figure shows the most important factors.

Pleasing working space (clean, with new equipment/furniture) is also one of the factors with a positive effect on motivation.

“We change a quarter of the computers every year so that we don't lag behind technically. We use all legal benefits; our collective agreement goes even beyond the basic legal limits.” (Interview 7)

Team-building represents another positive motivational tool that contributes to a sense of community among the local government office employees.

“The office Christmas party and sports day. We do them from our own financial resources and they have a very good response.” (Interview 14)

“The social program we have here, once a month a trip is organised to Vienna or Prague or somewhere else.” (Interview 7)

“Oftentimes they just need to refurnish the office. New furniture, new computers. That pleases them. I also take them somewhere for team building every two or three months. Somewhere for lunch, hiking ... They appreciate it more than a 50 EUR bonus.” (Interview 18)

Some respondents mentioned (choice “other”) that recognition from the community for work in local government can also be considered as a motivating element.

Opportunity to get promoted is the least important factor for employee motivation. This may be due to the fact that a large majority of local government offices are very small (less than eight employees) so there is no room for promotion within the office hierarchy.

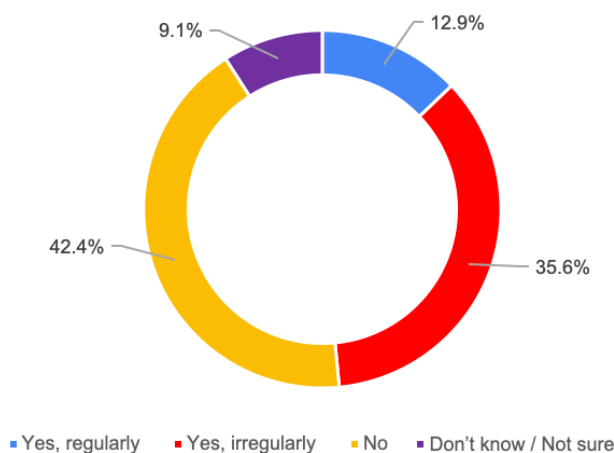
There are also several often-mentioned factors which discourage employees to work better or demotivate them. These factors can be clustered into five groups (descending according to the frequency of occurrence):

- ▶ a.) criticism and high expectations of citizens (intangible valuation of work),
- ▶ b.) excessive bureaucracy,
- ▶ c.) frequently changed laws and procedures,
- ▶ d.) low salaries,
- ▶ e.) poor quality team and workplace relationships (Survey, 2020).

Analysis of staff satisfaction with their work

Only a minority (13%) of LGUs analyse staff satisfaction with their work and terms of employment on a regular basis. Small LGUs with up to 500 inhabitants analyse staff satisfaction more or less the least often. This is mainly due to the fact that there is usually only one part-time (sometimes full-time) employee in these LGUs. On the contrary, LGUs with 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants analyse staff satisfaction more or less the most often on a regular basis (22%).

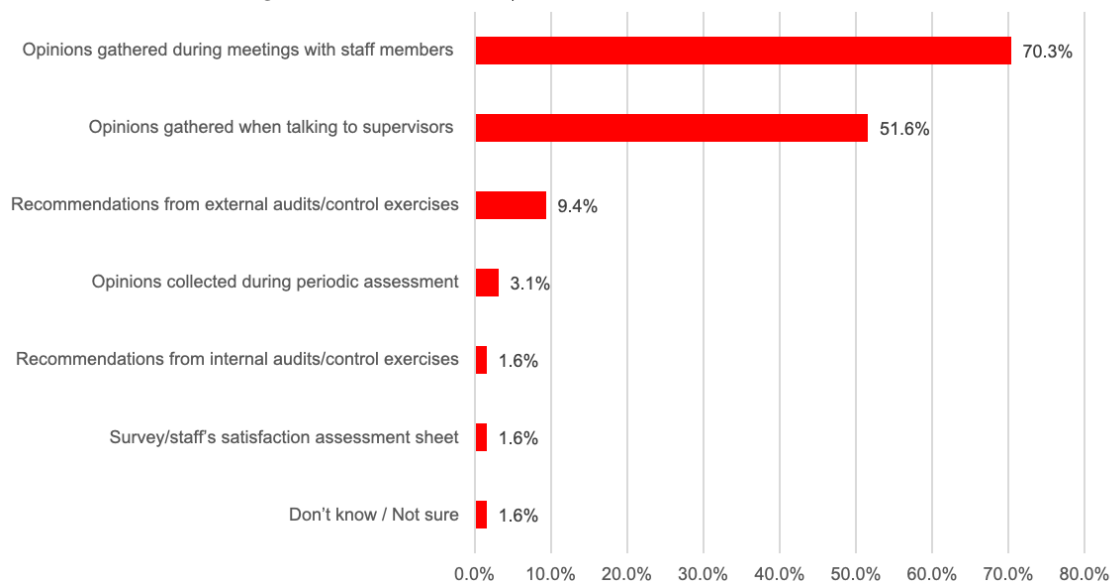
Figure 19: Analysis of staff satisfaction with their work



Source: Survey, 2020

■ LGUs, which indicated that they analyse satisfaction of their employees with work either on a regular or irregular basis, gather employees' opinions during meetings with an authorised employee (e.g. from the HR department) or supervisor.

Figure 20: Tools used on analysis of staff satisfaction with their work



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: Respondents were allowed to select more than 1 choice.

Methods to motivate and reward staff

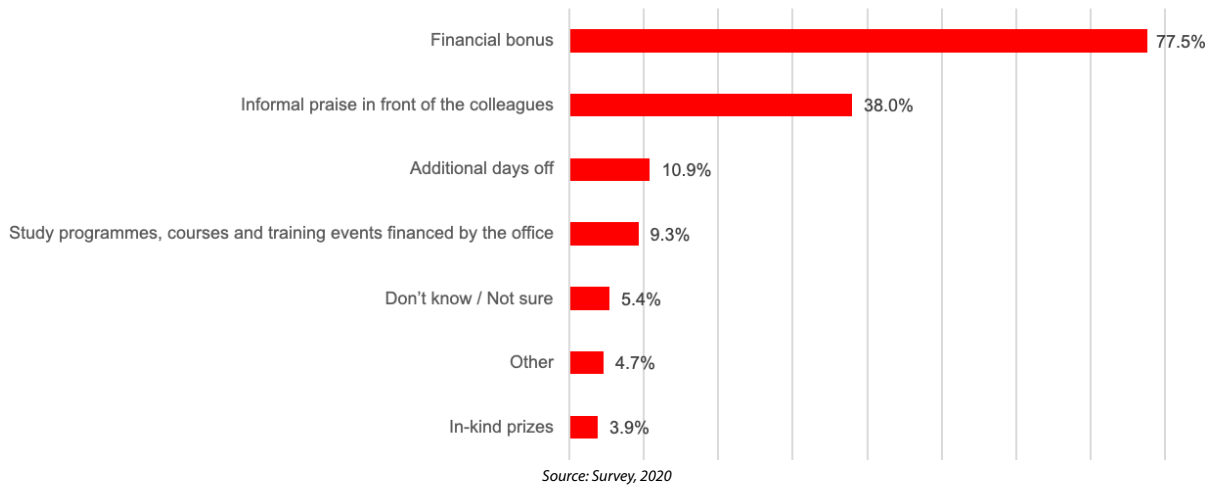
■ Praise for a job well-done is a key instrument to increase motivation – several respondents indicated that it has a more significant impact on motivation than a financial bonus.

“... this (praise) is very important for people – that someone notices that one has done a lot of work and good job.” (Interview 5)

“When I give a task that an employee does very well, I praise him/her for it. And I see it in their eyes that they appreciate it and they also often say that if you gave me 100 EUR bonus, I would be less satisfied than if you praise me in front of other employees.” (Interview 4)

■ However, financial bonus is more or less the most often used to motivate staff. Financial bonuses (e.g. on a semi-annual basis) are also a tool how to increase low salaries in local public administration. One out of ten respondents indicated that they rate additional days off or an opportunity to participate in a study programme or training event courses.

Figure 21: Methods to motivate and reward staff



■ Regarding the hiring processes, it seems that a suitable strategy to attract capable candidates for an open position in a local government office is to communicate a unified vision via social media. A change of political leadership (long-term incumbent) in an election can also be a driving force in hiring because new leadership and vision usually increase the attractiveness and status of working in a local government office.

“In recent years we have a problem not only with quantity, but especially with quality (of jobseekers). There is not much interest in working in self-government. At the same time, there are not enough quality candidates for specific departments. We need to advertise much more.” (Interview 14)

TRAININGS – CURRENT STATE AND ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The top management of an LGU (e.g. CAO, mayor, deputy mayor) most often participate in training events. More than 80% of respondents indicated that the members of top management of an LGU attend at least two (and more) training events in a year. These training events are, for instance, about civil defence or regular training provided by an external provider on administrative procedures, management of external financial resources/grants (EU funds mostly), etc. These training events sometimes last two or more days and are perceived by the participants as an opportunity for building informal relationships, exchange of experiences and coordination in grant proposals.

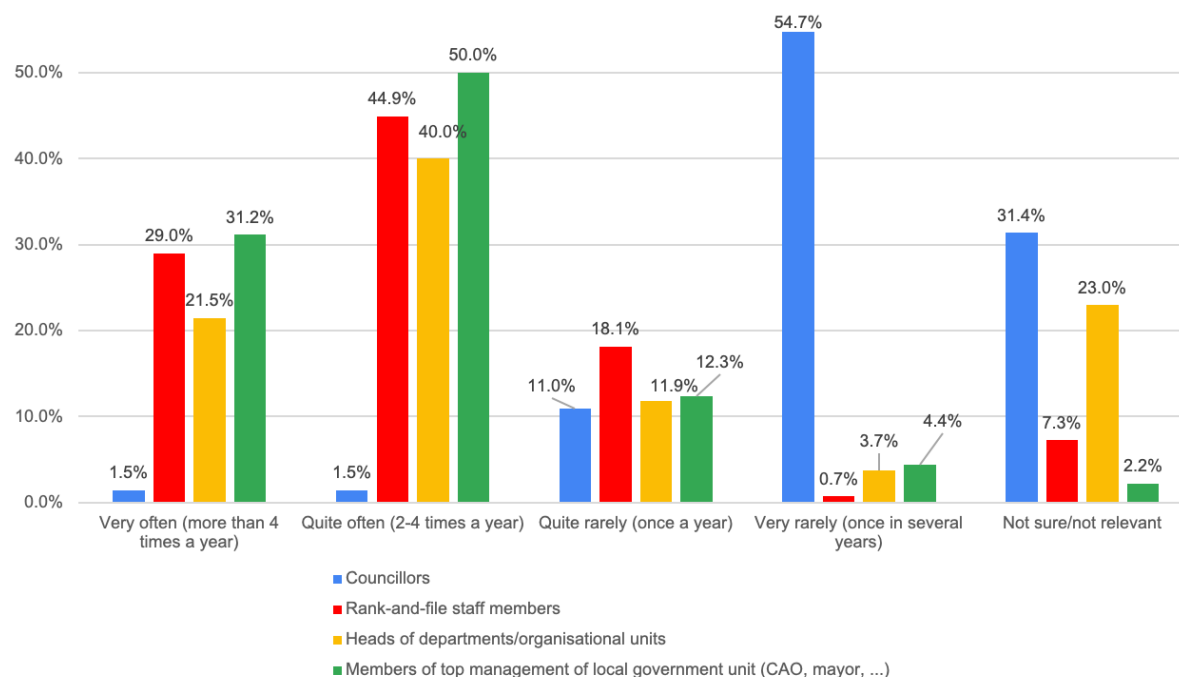
“We meet regularly 5-6 times a year. We meet for an hour or 30 minutes and one can bring a problem they are struggling with and seek advice. Or we go for lunch or coffee. It works on the basis of friendly relationships, like a family.” (Interview 8)

“Each month after a meeting of ZMOS we have a meeting of our local association of municipalities in the Horná Nitra (region). There are delegated councillors and we discuss topics like waste management, nursing, housing construction, and mutually help each other. The meeting is always organised by a different mayor, we visit their town where they show us how they do things there. It is very good, also because of a mixture of long-term mayors and younger mayors.” (Interview 18)

The heads of departments attend training events less often than rank-and-file employees. This is due to the fact that the heads of departments fulfil the role of managers and the expertise in specific areas is mostly required from rank-and-file employees. Statements made by some respondents indicate that training is most sought after by employees who perform administrative work whereas employees who work in technical fields (e.g. maintenance) demonstrate little interest in training or even resistance to attending training events. The respondents stated that the main barrier in attending training events is lack of time (Survey, 2020).

“Our employees tell me which trainings they would like to go on. RVC (regional training centre) sends a training plan with the schedule... When there is something new, a change in legislation, then our employees (go to the training).” (Interview 18)

Figure 22: Frequency of participation in trainings



Source: Survey, 2020

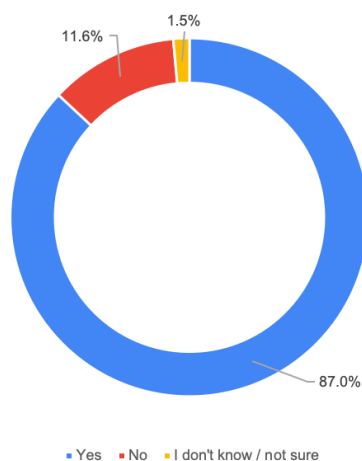
■ Even though the Act on Municipalities states that councillors must be continuously educated, the general interest in education is rather low. The respondents also indicate that councillors are rather passive and not interested in trainings (Survey, 2020). The survey data indicates that councillors tend to attend training events very rarely. However, according to respondents, local councillors have an insufficient level of knowledge about local government and its competences and legislation. This is mostly the case of newcomers. The LGU and the council is, in many cases, a “training centre” (FG 1). Some respondents suggest mandatory education for local councillors/certified education of councillors as a requirement for holding office (Danish model).

“But when someone gets there (on the council), few of them start to deal with the issue of public administration in general, and, at the same time, there are just as few (councillors) that would like to expand that knowledge even though they have already achieved the position. It's hard to get someone to go when it's not mandatory.” (Interview 7)

■ Newcomers with no experience and knowledge about the operation of LGUs enter the political arena after each election. Respondents indicate that a low level of knowledge about the operation of LGUs is one of the reasons for the conflict between mayor/office and local council. They also indicate that the main reason why councillors do not take part in training events is lack of interest (Survey, 2020).

■ The data indicates that in 13% of LGUs which participated in the Survey (2020), participation in training activities is very rare. However, almost 9 out of 10 LGUs admitted that their employees did take part in a training event in 2019.

Figure 23: Participation in training events in 2019

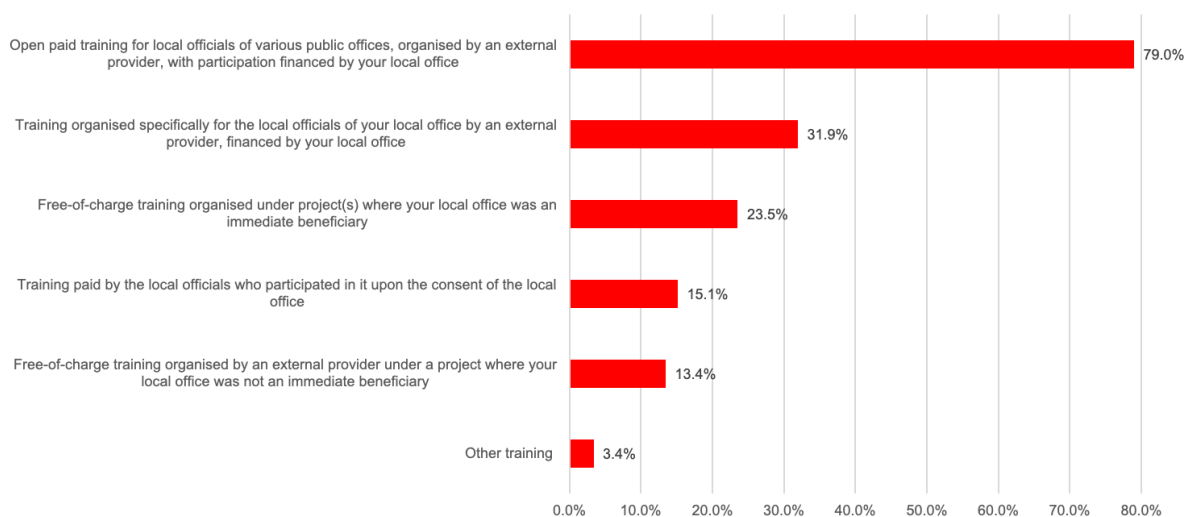


Source: Survey, 2020

Types of training events

■ In regard to the training events in 2019, the LGUs sent their employees most often to commercial training events organised by external providers. Almost 80% of respondents indicated that training events are, in the majority of cases, open for staff from various local public administration offices. Approximately 15% of respondents indicated that their employees pay for the training themselves. Free of charge training events are relatively rarer than commercial (paid) training events. RVCs (regional training centres) covered most of the trainings. Moreover, the respondents specified that district offices and various public bodies (ministries) also provide some trainings. Training events provided by service providers (e.g. e-gov system providers) are less often than the abovementioned. Universities typically do not provide trainings for local government.

Figure 24: Type of training events



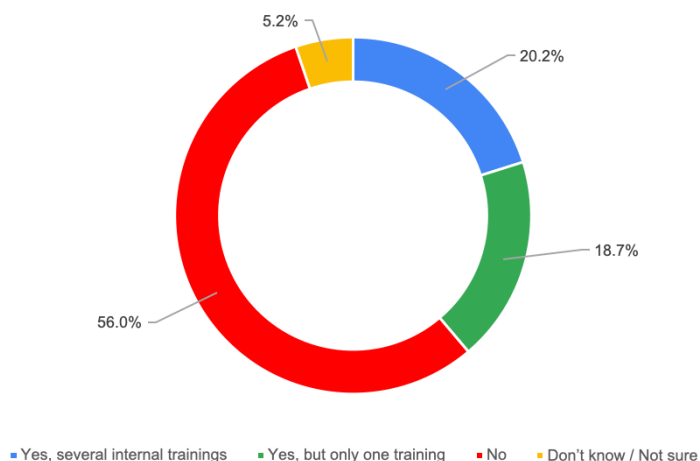
Source: Survey, 2020

■ In particular, trainings are necessary for newcomers – younger staff members who are coming in to replace the older employees who are soon to retire. The most experienced senior employees leave and there is, in many cases, no transfer of knowledge to the newcomers (FG 1). Adaptation training (senior employees train new employees) is formalised only in a minority of towns (e.g. Bratislava, Zvolen, etc.) either via two or three-day intensive training. However, in most of the interviewed LGUs, adaptation training is not formalised, and it usually takes the form of supervision by a senior or a leaving employee.

“We have a process of adaptation. At the moment, there is considerable interest in working in local government and there is a noticeable generational change happening. Their functionality depends on their superior. Some take it superficially and just take the new employee around the office whereas some take it much more in depth. This is mainly helped by the senior employees who help train new employees before retirement. ... It works and sometimes we even call them in part-time to help with learning.” (Interview 14)

Internal trainings – peer-to-peer training - provided by employee(s) of LGU for other staff is not very common. Peer-to-peer education is not formalised and rather ad hoc. Respondents indicate that employees transmit knowledge from trainings to their colleagues, however, this knowledge transfer is not formalised. The attempts to formalise it can be seen in larger towns. Less than 40% of respondents indicated that this type of formal knowledge transfer was organised in their local public administration office. This may also be due to the fact that the majority of respondents in the survey are small LGUs with three or less full-time employees.

Figure 25: Internal trainings



Source: Survey, 2020

Some mayors tend to send employees to another LGU for research/consultation in order to gain knowledge of good practice. However, this practise – study visits – is utilised by approximately 39% of LGUs. (Survey, 2020). These study visits mainly focus on exchange of experience in agenda such as the construction office, local taxes, administrative procedures or new amendments in legislation.

Another respondent suggests employee exchange programmes or short-term Erasmus + programmes for international administration official exchange.

“The exchange programme for administration officials can work like the Erasmus exchange programme for students. Administration officials could see how things are done in Scandinavian countries or Austria... I could send an employee somewhere for 3-4 days where they would feel comfortable and have both a good time and the opportunity to observe work of an administration official there. Administration officials have often been “conserved” in local government administration for 30 or 40 years, they graduated during the times of the former regime... This is not an attractive job environment for high quality economists or HR professionals.” (Interview 1)

Another respondent highlights the importance of cyclical or lifelong education of employees in LGUs. However, this type of education is very rare even in larger units and it is usually under a grant call for training in local self-government.

“We had a system of cyclical education, but it ended and the new management was not interested in continuing the original project.” (Interview 14)

Executive education for mayors and officials

■ Almost one third of the respondents have experience with conferences on local government issues. A similar share of respondents reported experience with exchange of experience in meetings and various forums. Both forms of training events enable the exchange of information and networking on an informal basis (Survey, 2020). Respondents would appreciate regularly organised large educational conferences for mayors and officials, which would consist of several simultaneously running panels on different topics (demand-oriented conference) previously chosen by potential participants (FG 3). This model allows participants to choose the topics they are interested in and also stimulate networking. Several associations (e.g. ZMOS) organise conferences, but with few opportunities for knowledge transfer and sharing good practices among participants.

■ Some respondents mentioned the idea of formal executive education for mayors. However, this form of training (study programmes, distance learning) is not prevalent – only 4% of respondents have any experience with this form of training. Executive education/training could aim at the competences of LGUs, overview of legislation and good practice examples. Robert Florida (2017) also mentions the contrast to any other field whether it be medicine, law, engineering or business, there is very little systematic training to equip mayors with the knowledge and tools they need to develop their communities and towns..

“...they (mayors) need support. We don't have any formal education programme for mayors. If you want to be a heart surgeon, you have to go through serious training and education. If you want to become a teacher, you have to graduate from university in the first place. These people (mayors), and we have 3,000 of them in Slovakia, do not have this. It takes time to get to know one's staff. One electoral term is not enough to get a comprehensive overview. ...It can be for instance a one/two-year extramural education programme.” (Interview 10)

“Nobody teaches us (mayors) how to handle specific situations, you know, they throw you in at the deep end among 4,000 people and you have to take care of it yourself. That is why we have such extremes such as Fekišovce.” (Interview 1)

“It usually takes a mayor a year to get the full picture about the tasks and competences.” (Interview 9)

“The mayor learns how to open the door during the first term in office.” (Interview 11)

■ Systematic education – executive programmes for officials and political leadership (mayor and councillors) – is missing. One respondent recalled that in the past (in the 1990s) there were much more opportunities for systematic education - executive programmes which were funded by foreign development projects and grants. Several graduates of these programmes still work in the field as leaders of various associations or training centres (such as RVCs). Some RVCs provide training, called Alphabet of the Mayor, for the first year after the mayoral election and covers the basic agenda of mayors. This is particularly popular among newcomers (Interview 3).

Agenda of training events

■ The most popular training events in 2019 were focused on topics such as accounting and management of finances, waste management, protection of personal data, public procurement and implementation of e-government. These training topics are also listed among the most needed to be covered by trainings (see Figure 26). Accountants are among the employees who attend trainings most often due to frequently changing legislation. Public procurement and tendering procedures and waste management are very complex agendas in which a high level of professional expertise and up-to-date knowledge is needed. GDPR is perceived as a threat because local administrations do not know what kind of data are protected and how they should be protected under the regulation. As a result, employees in local government administration are reluctant to share data with citizens as well as researchers. This uncertainty with this regulation might be the reason for the popularity of this training topic. Implementation of e-government and digitalisation of service provision is one of the most problematic agenda. Hence, it is not surprising that LGUs tend to send their employees to training in this topic.

■ Demanded content of the training is usually rather more related to the substance of the agenda of the given official. Training and lectures usually cover legislation amendments related to delegated competences from central government and original competences, especially in the agendas of local construction office, registry office, accounting, taxes, schools and social services. Some of the respondents find soft skills important for employees in the front office, however, it is not the priority.

“We could use some training on soft skills, but we do not have them yet and it is not a priority, even though the PR department was trained in this area.” (Interview 6)

“... communication with citizens and such soft skills... Because people are not only satisfied with the successful execution of the request but also with the way we treat them. Sometimes you have to say no but it depends on how you say it.” (Interview 13)

“Training, such as soft skills and the like, but we haven't got that far yet. I think that there is a lack of professional topics in Slovakia, this is such an extension to what we have now, and we are still at the beginning.” (Interview 7)

Figure 26: Agenda of training events

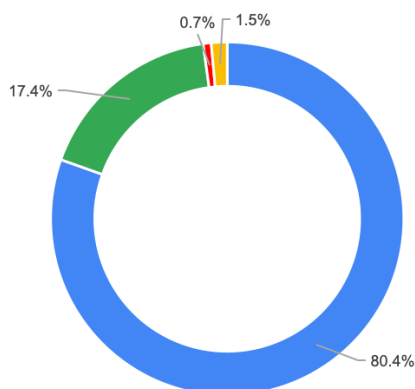


Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: More than one answer allowed

■ There is a majority consensus on the importance of participation in training events which, in general, increase staff competences. One out of five respondents consider training as a good complement, however, not always necessary. This can also be due to the varying quality of training events.

“Certainly, it is a good think to increase the level of knowledge of local officials. So, it is not just about that once I am working in a local government office that I know four procedures and that is sufficient for my entire professional life.” (Interview 15)

Figure 27: The perception on the development of staff competencies through participation in training events



- It is necessary and in general, participation in training events increases local officials' competencies
- I consider this to be a good complement to the development of the competencies and skills of local officials, however, they can work without it
- I find it unnecessary, participation in training does not have a significant impact on the development of local officials' competencies and skills
- Don't know / Not sure

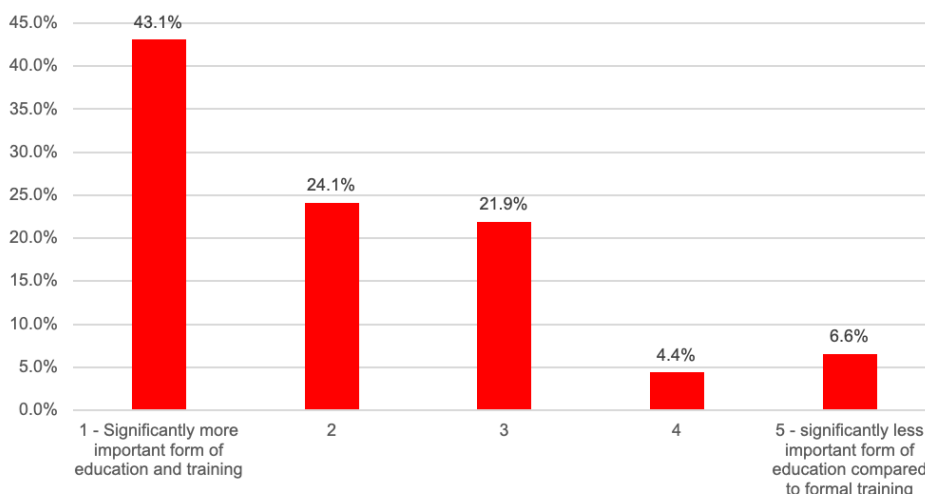
Source: Survey, 2020

■ The opportunity for networking is an important aspect of the training. According to respondents, each training is a unique opportunity for networking, sharing good practices, mutual support and knowledge transfer, which is sometimes more valuable than the training (lecture) itself.

“Many local officials go to these trainings repeatedly, each year. It is also a type of socialisation, meeting with officials from other towns. After the seminar, they go somewhere for a coffee and exchange experiences.” (Interview 3)

■ The majority of respondents (67%) perceive informal exchange of information and experience as more important than formal training. The informal gatherings of mayors, oftentimes after formal compulsory training (e.g. construction office, registry office agenda), provide fertile ground for exchange of experience, consultation but also for coordination on the administration of joint projects.

Figure 28: The importance of informal education



Source: Survey, 2020

■ The decision to send an administration official to a training may be influenced by a variety of factors. When it comes to making decisions about participation in training, the three most important factors are relevance of training topics for the current needs of the administration, belief that the trainer/facilitator(s) is/are competent and staff interest in the topic of the training (Survey, 2020).

■ Several interviewees stated that employees in local government administration are free to decide which trainings they want to take part in. Many employees tend to attend trainings on recent amendments to legislation which is part of their agenda or regular trainings in accounting or in relation to the registry office. The important factor is the quality of the trainer/lecturer. Other respondents point out that the training event should also be about discussion and should provide room for questions (FG 2).

"... 99% of training events are required by law. We go to training events held by lecturers we know. We know with whom it has value added. There are also associations of CAOs and they let know each other about who is good." (Interview 14)

"Over time, employees already have an overview of which agencies and which trainers are good at providing training. It is an explicitly empirical evaluation based on the experience of employees." (Interview 6)

■ Duration or distance of the training location are not among the most important factors in the decision to send employees to a training event (Survey, 2020). However, some respondents indicate that they do not have time to participate in training, and to take a day (even half a day) off is, in some cases, impossible due to the number of tasks that must be done at work. It is hard to find a temporary replacement for them while they are being trained.

■ There is a positive attitude of administration staff (employees) as well as political leadership towards training. Employees, as well as mayors and CAOs' offices indicate a general willingness among their employees to take part in training. Small and middle size LGU are often members of regional training centres (RVC), which provide the majority of training opportunities.

"It often happens that they (employees) complete training and use it to amend VZN (generally binding regulation), which means that that training has actually been reflected in practice." (Interview 5)

■ Financial resources for education are allocated in budgets and several respondents mentioned that extra financial resources are allocated if needed. The cost of a training is a more important decision factor that influences decisions about participation in training for small LGUs, but still less important than the relevance of training topics and the trainer's competence (Survey, 2020). The average cost per training for a member of RVC is about 15-30 EUR per participant.

■ Mayors and CAOs encourage employees to take part in training. Some CAOs have a training plan and also force their employees to participate in specific training (e.g. PC skills, communication skills, etc.). Respondents indicate that senior staff, mainly from technical departments (e.g. asset management, construction department) are reluctant to participate in training.

"Especially those employees just prior to retirement do not see this (training) as necessary and we do not force them into training." (Interview 14)

"... employees go (for training), but it's not systematised in any way. But we are planning it, so far it is on ad hoc solutions. We also have competence training, which cannot be systematised because it responds to changes in laws and legislation." (interview 6)

The most needed areas of training

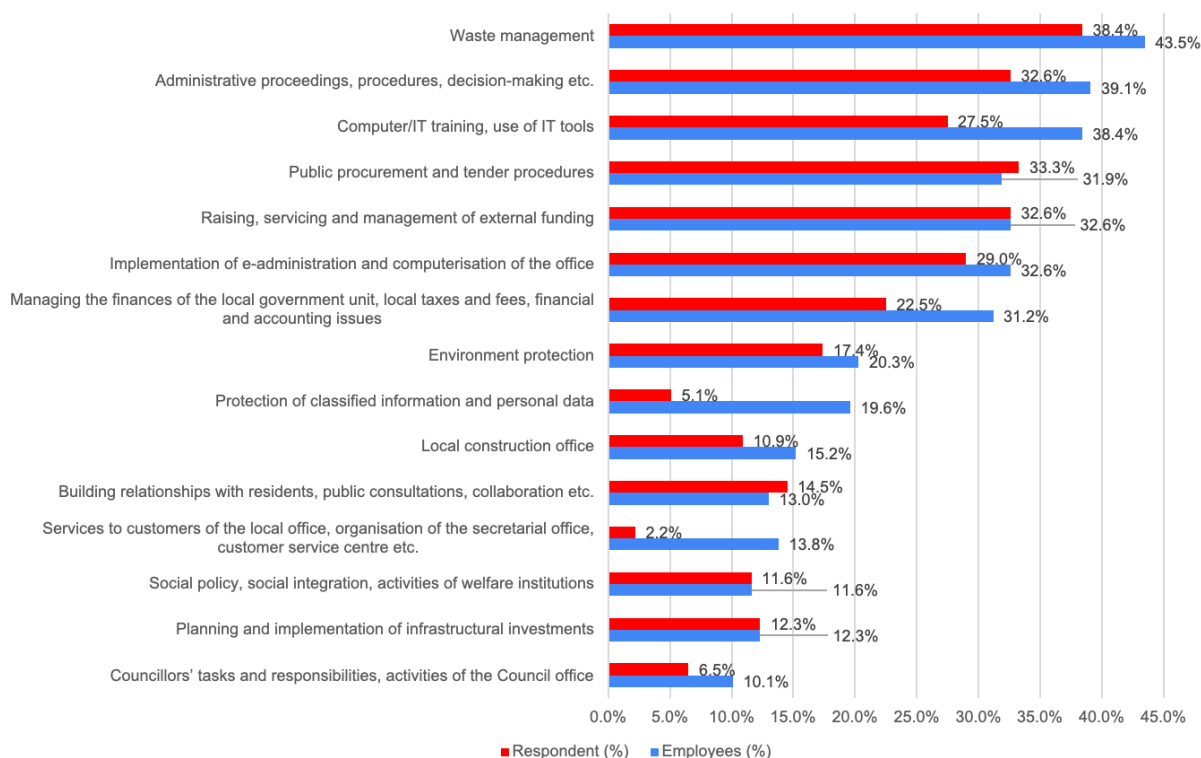
The most desirable areas of trainings are: waste management; administrative proceedings and procedures; computer/IT; managing external funding; implementation of e-administration; public procurement; and managing the LGU finances. The respondents indicated the need for training in these six areas for both employees/administration officials as well as themselves (mayors mostly). Waste management, one of the most prioritised areas of LGUs (see Figure 29), was identified as the most needed area of training. This may be due to the technical complexity of the area and of the importance of this area in relation to the environmental objectives. Several respondents assess public procurement as a very problematic area because of the administrative burden and complex and changing legislation.

The respondents also indicate the need to improve qualifications in the implementation of e-government and computer and IT skills. The nationwide public provider of cloud services and IT interface DCOM/DEUS provides the platform for e-government in the majority of local administration units. The lack of technical support and training is evaluated by the respondents as one of the main reasons for the slow and poor execution of digitalisation in local administration.

Respondents from small LGUs often mentioned that the position of mayor is very complex. In most cases, the local public administration has no more than 1 or 2 employees in addition to the mayor.

“To be a mayor is not enough. You have to be an economist, tactician, manager, accountant and even more.” (Interview 8)

Figure 29: The most needed areas of training for employees of local government administration and respondents (mayors mostly)



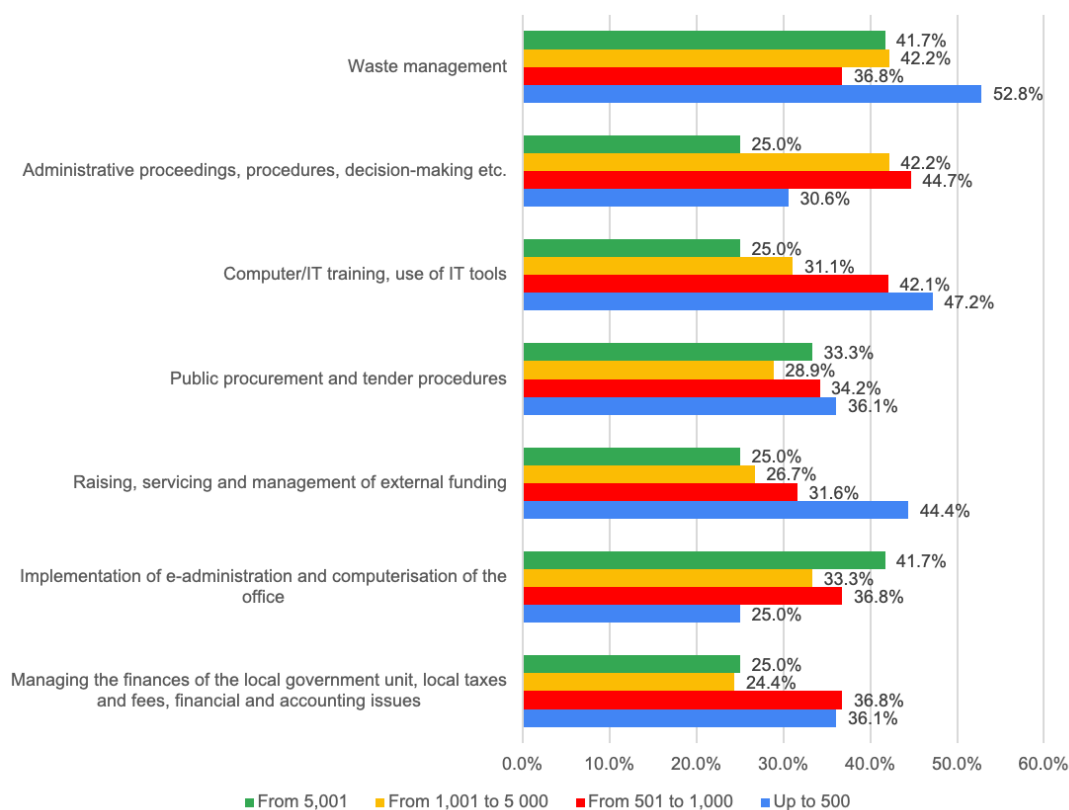
Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: The figure illustrates 20 of the most needed areas of training for employees of local government administration and respondents themselves (mayors mostly). Respondents were asked to select up to 5 choices (in total 30 options).

Some larger local governments with more employees have the space to create a wider range of education.

“Working with a PC, personal growth, teamwork, communication experience and legislation, as well as language learning, are the most sought-after types of learning. Even outside working hours.” (Interview 14)

Regarding size of LGUs, we do not observe any significant differences in the most needed areas of training for employees of local governments. However, smaller LGUs report a relatively greater need for computer skills than larger units. Also, the smallest LGUs with up to 500 inhabitants perceive a relatively greater need for trainings on the raising and management of external funding than larger units. This may be due to the fact that the smallest units report insufficient own revenues as one of the most problematic areas which puts pressure on finding extra sources of revenues.

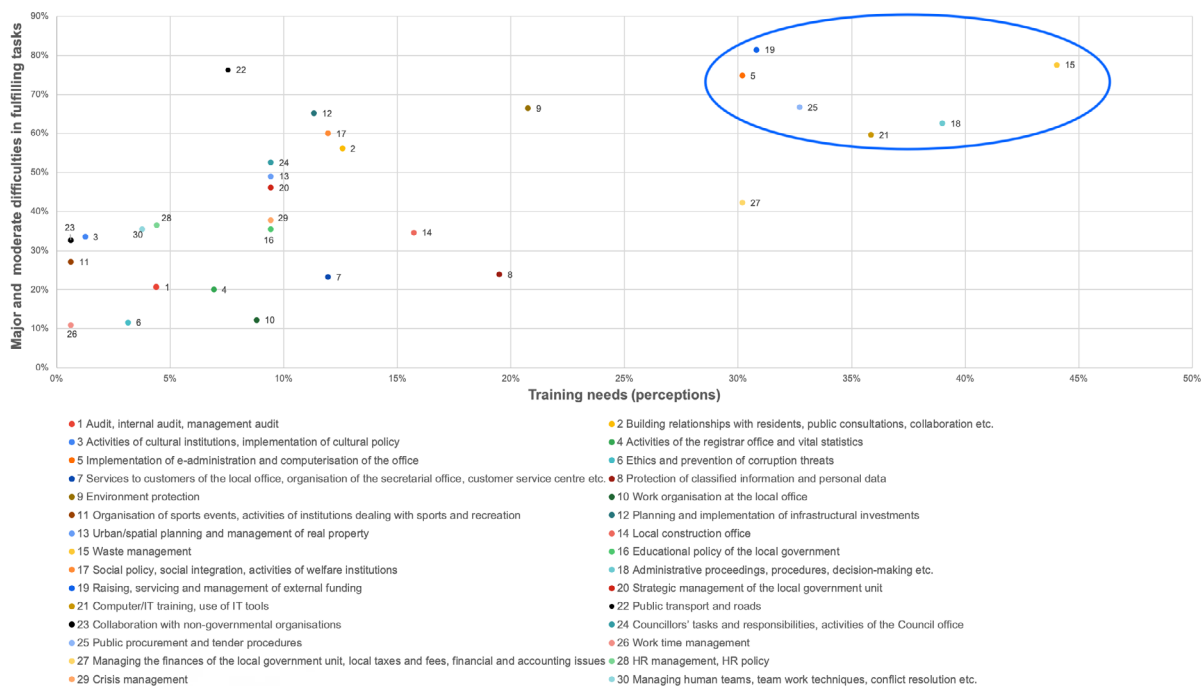
Figure 30: The most needed areas of training for employees of local government by size (top six areas) of LGUs



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: The figure illustrates 6 of the most needed areas of training for employees of local government administration. Respondents were asked to select up to 5 choices (in total 30 options).

As mentioned in the Introduction, the diagnosis of training needs should help to identify the discrepancies between perception/desires relating to the training postulates identified by respondents and training needs arising from the identified problems in fulfilling given tasks. Figure 31 separates the former (desires) from the latter (actual needs) – training postulates as mentioned by respondents were verified in contrast to the problem areas declared as existing in local government offices.

Figure 31: Areas of major and moderate difficulties in fulfilling tasks, versus perceived training needs of staff



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: The scatter plot illustrates the correlation between training needs indicated by respondents and the major problems in fulfilling tasks identified by respondents. The correlation was computed between training needs and major problems. Statistically significant correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.66, p < 0.001$) suggests moderate correlation between training needs and the major and moderate problems in performing tasks. The blue circle indicates the immediate training needs.

In several cases, the results indicate that training expectations and postulates presented by respondents deviate from the actual needs (problems in fulfilling tasks). In particular this is the case of public transport and roads management, planning and implementation of infrastructural investments, urban/spatial planning or social policy agenda. These cases are among the most problematic tasks; however, it does not translate into training desires. On the contrary, other areas such as managing the LGU finances, local taxes and fees or protection of classified information and personal data, areas which are performed (according to respondents) relatively smoothly, are among the top training postulates. This may be caused by several reasons such as a lack of supply of these training event topics, erroneous identification of problem causes or/and stereotypical approach adopted when selecting training topics.

Figure 32 illustrates how relatively often staff participated in training events in 2019 in comparison to major and moderate problematic tasks. It may indicate an insufficient supply of training events in public transport and roads, planning and implementation of infrastructural investments, building relationships with residents and public consultations, raising and management of external funding or urban planning. These areas are perceived as relatively problematic, however, LGUs report a relatively low level of attendance at these training events. In other areas such as registrar office, local construction office or protection of classified information LGUs report a relatively high level of attendance at these training events even though these tasks are perceived as tasks with minor problems in performance. However, this relatively high level of staff training in these areas may be the reason why LGUs implement these tasks agenda without any major problems.

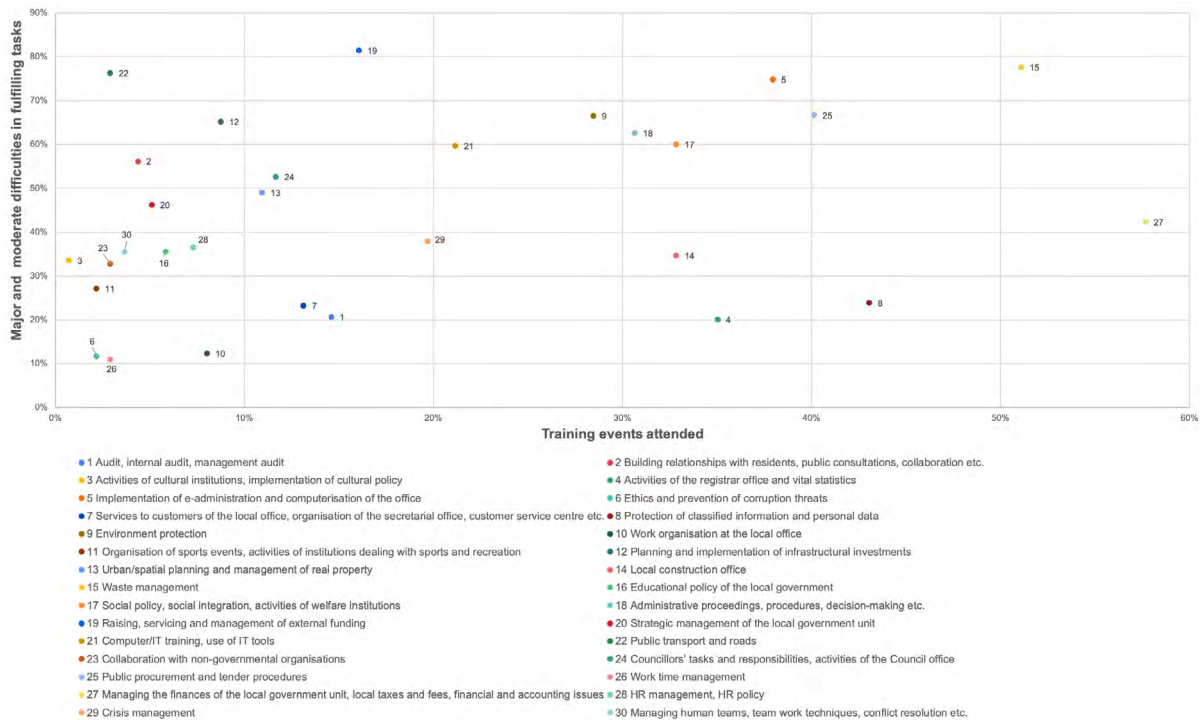
■ The most needed training topics for staff of local government offices (cross-checked with problems and attendance at training events in 2019 declared by the representatives of LGUs) relate to

- ▶ a.) implementation of e-administration and computerisation of the office,
- ▶ b.) planning and implementation of infrastructural investments,
- ▶ c.) raising, servicing and management of external funding,
- ▶ d.) computer/IT training, use of IT tools,
- ▶ e.) building relationships with residents and public consultations, and
- ▶ f.) strategic management of the local government unit.

Other needed training topics which are already supplied by training providers are waste management or administrative proceedings and procedures and environmental protection.

■ Again, we would like to emphasise that the list provided above only results from our analysis and the list does not cover all those factors which influence the operation of offices (e.g. regional context, economic and social situation of LGU, etc.). Financial costs of performing a competence may also influence the degree to which the agenda is perceived as problematic (e.g. insufficient financial transfers on transferred competences). This can be the case of public transport and roads, social policy, social integration, activities of welfare institutions. These areas are perceived as highly problematic but do not appear in the training needs identified by respondents.

Figure 32: Areas of major and moderate difficulties in fulfilling tasks, versus training events attended



Source: Survey, 2020 — Note: The scatter plot illustrates the correlation between training needs indicated by respondents and major problems in fulfilling tasks identified by respondents. The correlation was computed between training needs and major problems. Statistically significant correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.32, p < 0.001$) suggests a weak correlation between training events attended in 2019 and the major and moderate problems in performing tasks.

Competences of employees in local government administration

■ The most needed skills and competences for employees in local government administration in the modern era are an ability to work with computers and other ICT, flexibility, expertise in the field, knowledge of legislation and empathy. Technical skills are perceived as fundamental especially due to the gradual digitalisation of services. However, the respondents' answers might be influenced by the Covid-19 crisis (March-May 2020) which has put pressure on faster digitalisation of services. At the same time, the participants emphasise the need for basic computer literacy and at least slightly advanced working skills with MS Office packages.

■ Both flexibility and empathy can be considered as soft skills which are, according to many relevant institutions (e.g. PwC, World Economic Forum, International Labour Organisation), among the most needed skills in the future. Soft skills are perceived as very important by some respondents.

"...in various successful foreign corporations, communication skills and soft skills are in first place. And here, in the state administration, they don't seem to care. That should change." (Interview 1)

■ However, the administration officials, often senior employees or employees from a technical agenda (maintenance), are often reluctant to take part in training for soft skills. This also sometimes generates conflict between senior and junior employees (FG 1). One of the reasons of this reluctance to take part in training is that tasks and responsibilities await them back at the office, which means catching up with the tasks and duties after the training event.

"We have the intention "let's train people of the first contact (in front office)." To train them how to manage contact with the citizens. This is the first time we have tried this. It's a two-day training... They (employees) are already rebelling and I am already being told that they don't need it." (Interview 2)

■ Other skills which are generally accepted as the most necessary skills for the future are complex problem solving, creativity and the ability to innovate processes, communication skills and the ability to work in teams, however, they are perceived as less needed for employees in local government administration. Employees in HR agenda mention stress management (FG 1) as an important skill.

"There should be training on decency in performing in front of citizens and verbalisation. You should see my correspondence with other mayors or when a mayor has to deliver a speech... spelling, stylistics and the level of skills in public performance of some mayors is ridiculous." (Interview 8)

■ Other respondents point out the importance of managerial and analytical skills.

"Should they be a lawyer? Economist? Sociologist? Political scientist? With 3,800 competences, it is difficult to say which specialisation is the best. The expertise is not exclusively about the specialisation but rather about managerial skills and the ability to process and evaluate arguments." (Interview 23)

Figure 33: The most needed competencies and skills for an employee in local government administration in the 21st century (respondents' perception)



Source: Survey, 2020

Of course, not every official necessarily has to fulfil all the above qualities and skills. An even more important challenge for larger local governments is to put together a quality team at the local authority. The problem, however, is that the reality in local government limits the work of teams that are multidisciplinary and cover the agenda of several sections and departments. Individual departments and sections work together, even many times not even sharing data – a strong hierarchy. Another important question is how to attract quality people to the local office (see also the section Motivation of officials in local government office).

“When I arrived, the office workforce was old. The average age was 60, many were over 60. When such employees leave, you have a problem. This is the institutional memory that everyone needs. When a large portion of the employees leave, you have a problem because you have trouble finding professionals at a normal level and it is a waste of time hiring young people as they need months, if not years, to learn the job.” (Interview 7)

Training sessions related to analytical skill, public policy development, public management practices, innovations development and implementation, or behavioural insights in policymaking are usually not provided.

Supply of training events

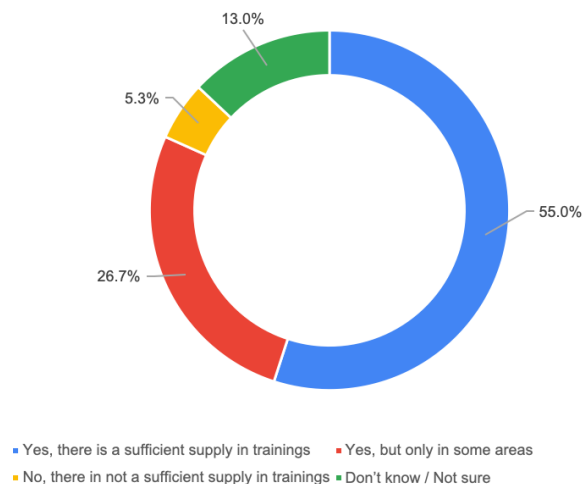
The majority of LGUs are satisfied with the supply of trainings (55 %). One third of LGUs see room for some enlargement of the current supply or more support in some fields such as waste management and environmental protection. Some respondents mentioned that training should be less theoretical and more practical and held by people who actually work in the field and develop public policies.

“The point is that the lecturer should know about legislation, for example, that he/she was involved in creating the legislation.” (Interview 14)

Due to the rapid onset of digitalisation services at local level, some LGUs are not able to keep up and are lagging behind and therefore they need more training and support in this area.

“I consider training in electronisation (digitalisation) to be a priority. Even now, trainings in it are underway. The employee should already have some experience, they must be able to work in the basic systems. I consider this knowledge to be a basic selection criterion when hiring employees, ...it is like a driving license you need to have, if you want to be a driver.” (Interview 6)

Figure 34: Supply of trainings



Source: Survey, 2020

There is a great supply of various training and courses provided by well-established regional training centres (further also RVC) that operate in 9 towns and 2 RVCs (Zvolen, Rimavská Sobota) which are not formally in the network (they left the network in the past few years). Of these 11 RVCs, the 9 established the Association of Municipal Education (Asociácia vzdelávania samosprávy). The aim of the association is to coordinate the education and training for municipalities (elected representatives and officials). It also supports common activities and events, develops partnerships with other professional associations operating in the municipal environment and publishes educational literature (Interview 24). In addition, there is also a vast number of private firms. Respondents evaluate the quality of education provided by the RVCs as high. However, the quality of trainings and courses vary. The training is usually a lecture for dozens of participants with limited room for questions from participants.

Some respondents suggest that the state should provide a methodology of education that would serve as a basic framework for the education of mayors and officials.

The training market is heterogeneous, although dominated by one major player, namely, the regional training centres (RVCs). They provide training (lectures) related to new amendments in legislation, accounting, taxes, specialised (two-day) training for so called “professional groups” – employees at local construction offices, registry offices and other highly specialised positions (organised once or twice a year). They therefore partly cover the fact that ministries do not publish (or publish too late) clear methodological guidelines for the implementation of new regulations. The form of education is usually a lecture (limited interaction and without any problem-solving activities) and the usual number of applicants is about 100. They also created several certified courses, such as on municipal accounting. At the start of every electoral term, RVCs send a list of training opportunities to all new mayors and local councillors.

There are also other private providers, however, the quality of training is questionable. For instance, there is the Institute of Lifelong Learning (icv.sk) based in Košice that provides training events on transferred competences.

Some LGUs hire private firms to cover the agendas not provided by RVCs (e.g. soft skills, stress management, conflict mediation, etc.). The most important selection criteria for a training provider is previous experience with a lecturer. According to the respondents, training sessions provided by ministries are perceived to be the least sufficient in terms of quality – respondents complained that they often consist of ministry officials reading out the relevant legal act word by word.

“RVCs are efficient and well covered by trainings such as human resources and thereby wages, economics, accounting, budgets, which are exactly the practical ones for those employees in charge at the levels that really make the work. Accountants, payroll staff, budgeters, financial control. ... Basically, the RVCs have it all arranged, it's just copy paste in a big way. ... My people go there.” (Interview 2)

“Those RVCs are good, even though I only have experience with Košice and Prešov. ZMOS also has good training, when a law changes, they can process it within two or three days and give some instructions for LGUs on how to incorporate it.” (Interview 9)

“There is no central coordination of education. There is no methodology that should be provided by the state. Whether the RVCs do it or someone else, the state shouldn't really care, just as long as the schedule and methodology are followed. For example, an amendment is issued and there is no uniform training from the ministry, the RVC in Rovinka will provide training because it thinks it is necessary.” (Interview 7)

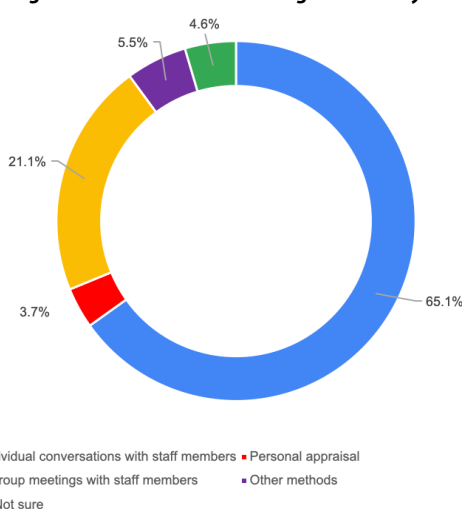
E-learning and information portals are alternatives to “classic” training. Respondents expressed diverse attitudes to the benefits of e-learning. The pros of these online forms are lower costs and flexibility, whereas the cons are both interaction and networking missing and also the small supply in this field. The Public Administration Portal (vssr.sk) operated by a private company provides information about legislation, accounting, reporting and additional information for public administration. This portal also has a specific section for local governments and mayors. This portal also provides video trainings and also online consultations for premium members.

Analysis of training needs by LGUs

Two out of three LGUs indicated that they analyse the training needs of their staff. However, no LGU has a formal procedure, an ordinance or a rule which defines how training needs should be analysed (Survey, 2020). Two out of three LGUs analyse training needs via individual (one to one) conversations with employees. Another method is a discussion with employees about their training needs. No LGU uses surveys for this purpose and only 4% of LGUs formalised this process in their personal appraisal.

“Participation in training is not reflected in the financial evaluation of employees. ... In our office, it works in such a way that employees tend to report that they would like to go to specific trainings. But it is not even in our power, nor is it our goal, to send them to all the trainings they want to go to.” (Interview 6)

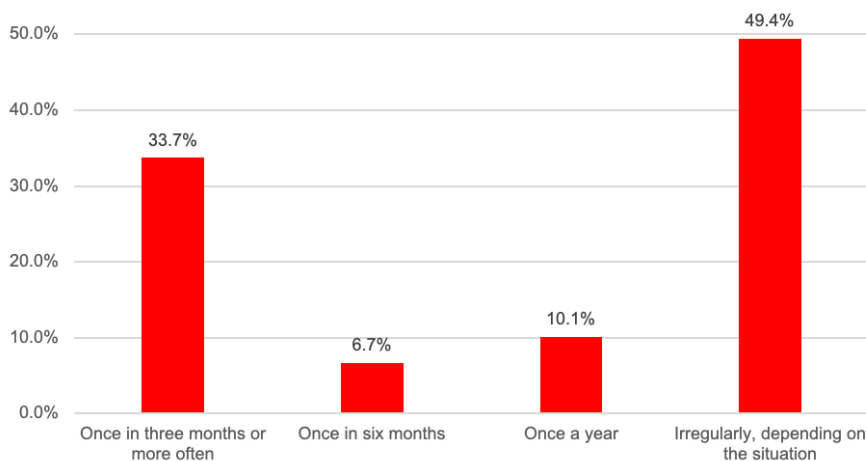
Figure 35: How are staff training needs analysed



Source: Survey, 2020

Among the LGUs which do diagnose the training needs of their staff, we notice that the prevailing (49%) approach is to analyse training need irregularly, depending on the given situation. It is important to note that this approach was the most prevalent (30%) in small size LGUs (up to 1,000 inhabitants) with a few full-time employees. However, irregular analysis of training needs is the most common approach even in larger LGUs. Irregularity of training needs analysis does not allow the offices to monitor the development of staff skills. This may also imply that training needs analysis is not an integral part of organisational management of the staff. One third of respondents declared that they conduct needs analysis once every three months or even more often. Data indicates an extreme in the practices of diagnosing training needs. Diagnosing training needs is either extremely rare or very infrequent.

Figure 36: How often are staff training needs analysed

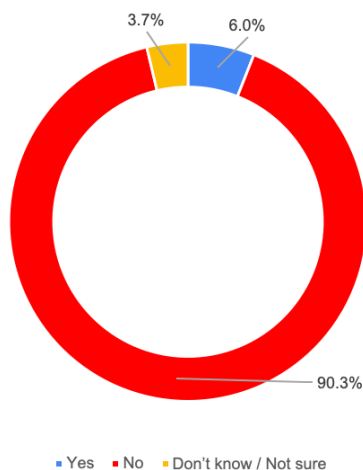


Source: Survey, 2020

A large majority (90%) of LGUs do not develop a training plan for their staff. Only a few LGUs think systematically about training and education of their employees. This suggests that LGUs send (or allow) their employees to participate in training on an ad hoc basis. This seems to have no relation to the size of an LGU. The survey indicated that LGUs with 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants tend to prepare their training plan more or less the most often. Nevertheless, survey data suggests that LGUs allocate financial resources for training events. The amount of financial resources allocated for training events (share of total budget) is negatively correlated with the size of an LGU. Small LGUs with up to 500 inhabitants tend to allocate on average 2.5% of total budget (approx. 300 EUR) and LGUs with more than 5,000 inhabitants allocate on average less than 1% of total budget.

“The training plan contains specific activities, areas, seminars. And it is also evaluated at the end of the year, and the plan is actually compiled according to how the managers set their requirements.” (Interview 5)

Figure 37: Training plan



Source: Survey, 2020

Recommendations

This section provides a list of recommendations regarding building the capacities of local government administration as well as training needs. These recommendations are based on the findings of this analysis and are supported by the data (quantitative and qualitative) discussed in the section above.

Current inefficiencies in local government system

■ One of the crucial problems of the Slovak self-government system is its fragmentation. Many other problems that Slovak municipalities suffer from, especially those related to insufficient capacities and resources (whether financial or personal), are closely linked to it. There are several ways to address this problem:

- 1. Territorial consolidation (amalgamation)** would certainly help with strengthening the capacities (economy of scope and scale). However, there is a need to build a larger support for such reform.
- 2. Redistribution of competences** based on the size of the local government units is also an option that demonstrated its relevance in other countries (e.g. Czech Republic). Nevertheless, it means giving up some of the competences (especially in the case of smaller units) in relation to which there is no consensus among the mayors.
- 3. Greater scale and support of the intermunicipal cooperation** is a delicate option to address the problem of fragmentation. Local representatives need stronger incentives to cooperate, not only in areas where it is necessary for them (building authority, education) but in other areas as well. The goal should be to support permanent cooperation even in the performance of original competences, not only the transferred ones, perhaps even provide joint front offices. The crucial form of support is the financial one which would reflect the up-to-date state of competences and responsibilities. It is important to note that the support of the intermunicipal cooperation should be based on logical and coherent criteria which would lead to higher efficiency in the performance of competences. This is not necessarily the case of the currently formed joint municipal offices.

Local representatives agreed that the financial transfers for the provision of transferred competences are not at a sufficient level and should be increased. There is a need for a thorough audit of competences and their costs that would determine acceptable financial amounts for individual transferred competences.

The audit should also analyse the division of competences among local government units, counties (regions) and state authorities. This could lead to the redistribution of particular problematic competences in order to achieve logical coherence.

The problem of insufficient own revenues of small municipalities should be addressed, whether by dealing with the fragmentation problem in one of the ways mentioned above or by increasing their revenues. Otherwise, small municipalities will be permanently in the position of caretakers with very small abilities to develop and innovate.

The administration of EU funds should be simplified as well as the requirements to apply for them. Bureaucratic demands should not exceed those made by the EU/European Commission itself. Local representatives agreed that a lot of these demands do not lead to more transparency nor decrease the room for corruption or fraud, but considerably complicate the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of the funds and increase the financial and personal costs of their allocation.

Local government units need to be properly informed about upcoming legislative changes. It would be beneficial to create an information channel where all planned and adopted changes affecting municipalities would be published (it could be a part of slovensko.sk). Clear methodological guidelines with practical examples should also be published here. Including a mandatory impact assessment regarding local government might be considered when adopting new legislation.

The communication of state authorities (dissemination of information) and their cooperation with local government units need to improve. For example, district authorities could consider creating a position of a liaison officer for local government units that the municipal leaders and officials could refer to. The cooperation and information transfer across ministries and other state authorities themselves should become more systematic so the local government units would not need to go "from door to door" searching for correct information.

The state should strive to eliminate instances where there is a need for duplicate processing of an agenda in both digital and paper form, whether it means amending the legislation or the improvements in e-government solutions (slovensko.sk). The sharing of various official documents and registers across the public administration entities should be simplified and systematised.

Towns and cities should create a slack for local officials on brainstorming, data analysis and creativity in terms of process improvement. Slack for innovations needs to be systematised as an important part of the work. Creating space during working hours for employees to reflect on how to improve processes and public policies can be an effective tool for reducing burnout and work monotony.

Wage level is one of the biggest constraints for hiring good quality employees who can prefer higher salaries in private sector. However, there are other important factors which influence the attractiveness of employment in local public administration – a balance between career and private life, job stability, an opportunity to work for the public good, vicinity (from home to work), or good relationships in the workplace. Hence, LGUs may focus on improvements in non-financial incentives and advertise them on the labour market.

There is a need to further specify the position of the chief administrative officer in the legislation. As the position becomes more professionalised in practice, the legislation should also reflect this. The legislators should consider specifying the authority, competences, duties and responsibilities of the head of the local office in the legislation.

Training needs

Any national training strategy has to distinguish between competencies and knowledge. Knowledge is theoretical or practical understanding of a subject (e.g. legislation). Competency is knowledge put into action. Competencies are values, skills, experience, etc. They can be so-called mechanical (mechanically learned procedure, but the official is not able to adapt it in solving other problems) and adaptive (can adapt skills to solve various problems).

The ability to work with a computer and standard software tools (Word, Excel, e-mail, e-gov systems) are a basic prerequisite for employees in local administration. These skills are perceived as fundamental especially because of the gradual digitalisation of services. Recent experience of the global Covid-19 pandemic has put pressure on a faster digitisation of services, increasing not only the requirements for the technical skills of local officials, but also for the supply of equipment in local offices. The former needs to be addressed by active state support of training in this area which will be focused on training of adaptive competences. The latter is an opportunity for targeted financial support for the purchase of adequate technical equipment in local offices (especially in smaller LGUs).

Moreover, any national training strategy should take into consideration that basic technical skills (mentioned above) will be not sufficient in the long term. Work with analytical software, work with databases and documents on cloud etc. represent the challenges ahead.

Many officials have worked in local offices for 30 years or more and joined after leaving school. For this reason, certified lifelong learning needs to be considered.

Local representatives are aware of the importance of soft skills for local officials (especially in front office) and perceive them as an extension of officials' expertise. However, it is not the priority in any LGU. Supply of training events on soft skills is not sufficient. Therefore, any national training strategy has to elaborate on important soft skills and teaching methods for local officials (e.g. stress management, empathy, teamwork, etc.) as well as mayors (e.g. communication skills).

When educating officials, it is necessary to work with their "reality", to take into account the real problems that they normally solve. Training (e.g. through case studies) should allow for the active involvement of participants through the application of experimental learning theory and problem-based learning, which will allow a debate on how to solve the problem.

Local government units need methodical support, such as sharing the examples of good practice or manuals for a joint performance of individual competences.

In practice, there are various formal (Association of CAOs) as well as informal (e.g. groups of mayors) communities of practice. Within these communities, experiences are exchanged, problem-solving consultations and coordination (e.g. in project submission) take place. This spontaneous approach is assessed as valuable and at the same time it is a sustainable form of exchange of experience. Therefore, there is room to consider supporting this type of informal education (networking).

Exchange visits are used relatively often, but often only take the form of a short visit to another local office. There is room in this area to support exchange visits as a form of education, in combination with a peer review approach in the transfer of good practice from one local government unit to another.

Any national training strategy should take into account that the majority of local councillors do not participate in training events due to various reasons (unwillingness, lack of time or motivation, etc.). However, local councillors, especially newcomers, need training on the competences of LGUs, their rights, duties and legal possibilities and the position of the local council in the local government system as such.

The analysis identified room for executive education for mayors. This type of formalised education programme is missing. Executive education/training could aim at the competences of LGUs, overview of legislation, soft and communication skills and good practice examples.

■ Training events related to analytical skill, public policy development, public management practices, innovation development and implementation, or behavioural insights in policymaking are usually not provided. These competences are highly needed especially in larger towns and cities where the scope of agenda as well as the amount of resources (human, financial) open up opportunities for innovation and modern approaches in public policy-making. The state should consider supporting this type of education, for instance through its analytical and behavioural units.

■ COVID-19 pandemic made e-tool and e-learning approach even more relevant. E-learning and information portals are alternatives to “classic” training and these e-tools can complement the traditional forms very well. Their pros are lower costs and flexibility, whereas the cons are mostly limited interaction and missing networking. Moreover, the supply of such tools for LGUs is still limited.

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Interview 2 (recorded), with the CAO of a town with 5,001 to 50,000 inhabitants, conducted by authors, 12/11/2019

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Interview 25 (unrecorded), with the representative of the e-government provider DEUS, conducted by authors, 18/06/2020

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TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SLOVAKIA

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