

*Public Perception
of Local Governments*

Edited by
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Second edition

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Foreword

The chapters in this book were prepared under the “Local Government Policy Partnership” Program. This is a joint project of two donor organizations: the British Government’s Department for International Development (DFID), and the Local Government and Public Service Initiative (LGI) of the Open Society Institute, Budapest, which launched this regional program. The “Local Government Policy Partnership” (LGPP) projects intend to contribute to policy development and innovations in Central and Eastern European countries.

LGPP hopes to develop expertise and to support professional cooperation among local government specialists throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Parallel to this, experiences from this region should be made available in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Central Asia. The core partner countries are the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. However, other countries have been invited to participate in these regional projects, which would help direct information exchange and comparison of policy efforts. Planned LGPP publications include policy studies and proposals discussed with government officials and experts in the countries involved.

Targeted beneficiaries of LGPP projects are national government ministries, local government associations, research and training institutions, and individual local authorities throughout the CEE region. LGI intends to publish three studies each year. In 2001–2002, (the first year of LGPP operations), the following policy areas were selected:

- a) Education financing and management;
- b) Regulation and competition of local utility services, and
- c) Public perception of local governments.

This book, however, should not be seen as a typical product of the LGPP program. This work offers no specific policy recommendations. Instead, it concentrates on changes in public attitudes towards local governments, and on differences in approaches towards various components of the respective municipal systems. As local governments become increasingly important in citizens’ everyday lives, political institutions and public actors who can demonstrate greater sensitivity towards public opinion are vital for the success of future reforms. The hidden message of this work is that without regular and systematic analysis of public opinion, viable local government policies will become even more difficult to design and implement in the future.

Ken Davey & Gábor Péteri

August, 2001

Between Active Appreciation, Passive Approval and Distrustful Withdrawal

*Citizens' Perception of Local Government Reforms
and Local Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*

Paweł Swianiewicz

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Between Active Appreciation, Passive Approval and Distrustful Withdrawal

Citizens' Perception of Local Government Reforms and Local Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

Prof. Paweł Swianiewicz, Ph.D.

Comparing both citizens' opinions and their involvement in local government reforms in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia seems to be a valid undertaking. This is chiefly because decentralization reforms in all four countries were introduced very close to each other and in a similar atmosphere. In Poland, the new Local Government Act was passed by parliament in March 1990 and was followed by local elections that May. The first democratic local elections in the three other countries were organized not much later—between October and November of 1990.

A decade after political transition, it is worthwhile to analyze how deeply such reforms have changed the socio-political makeup of these countries. Have they been noticed and appreciated by the local population, or have most citizens come to regard new local governments as irrelevant and/or ineffective? Obviously, local government reform in all four countries had many similarities, but also demonstrated numerous differences¹.

From this book's point of view, two of the most important differences were the methods of political redivisions of territories, and the overall guiding philosophy of local governments to their new statuses related to this division.

In all four countries, traditional small local-government units were amalgamated during the 1960s and 70s. These amalgamations, being a result of the widespread belief in economies of scale in the administration and delivery of services, were introduced by former communist regimes without any real consultation with their citizens. Not surprisingly, this was usually seen as something forced and often arbitrary.

After the collapse of the communist system, the trend quickly reversed in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia but not so much in Poland. The latter nation—despite the slight increase in the number of local governments—decided to retain the territorially-consolidated system at the lowest (i.e., municipal) level. In the three other countries, almost every community, regardless of size, decided to declare its own local government. Although there was never an openly-formulated, conscious policy supporting fragmentation, Czech and Hungarian politicians were allowing this spontaneous tendency to develop over time. In Poland, any “bottom-upwards” pressure for splitting-up small municipalities was not so strong. The central government also seemed more determined to not allow territorial fragmentation. The result of these processes is briefly summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1
Size of Municipal Governments in Countries Analyzed

	Average Population Size	Proportion of Local Governments Below 1 000 Persons [%]
Poland	15 500	0
Hungary	3 330	55
Slovakia	1 850	68
Czech Republic	1 700	80

SOURCE: T. Horváth (2000), G. Péteri (1991)

One may claim that these directional differences in territorial organization of local governments to a large extent arose from deeper underlying philosophical differences of the role of local government in the modern state. These differences, and the model explaining their impact on the mode of communication between local authorities and citizens, are described below.

Proponents for decentralization reforms around the world usually cite improved and closer relationships between citizens and local authorities. Eastern and Central European countries have been no exception to this rule. In the modern history of thinking about local governments, there have been two competing basic approaches: “natural”—suggesting that local government

is an intrinsic part of community life, and “functional”, claiming that local government should exist only as far as it helps the state as a whole to function better. But in spite of the existence of these two theories, there is a common agreement about three core principles of local democracy mentioned in theoretical literature [i.e., Sharpe 1993; Stewart and Greenwood 1995]:

- “Liberty” (autonomy) meaning in this case the existence of local government to protect from concentration of political power in one center, and allows for making different political choices in different localities;
- “Participation” (democracy)—meaning that the existence of local governments allowing for wider inclusion of citizens in self-governance, and,
- “Effectiveness”—meaning the ability of local governments to deliver various services more effectively.

All of the three values mentioned above are usually seen as essential. But in practice, within different countries, the main focus may vary significantly. I would like to draw special attention to one of them.

Goldsmith (1996) claims that in Southern Europe, the understanding of the importance of local government is more focused on so-called “communitarian” values and representation of territorial interests. Territorial representation, or “political localism”, therefore, is viewed as the essential value of local democracy in the region. On the other hand, the Northern European local government model tends to place more attention on the value of effectiveness, and is more concerned by the tension or contradiction between local and national democracy on the one hand, and ideas about equality and justice on the other.

Modes of local government reforms in Central and Eastern Europe seem to reflect this variation of approaches. A very radical and rapid territorial fragmentation of local government system in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and to lesser extent in Hungary, was a reflection of primary focus on giving even very small communities a certain degree of autonomy. This reflected the belief that such was necessary to strengthen democratic principles of relationships between citizens and public authorities.

On the other hand, in Poland the policy to retain the territorially-consolidated system has been very much related to effectiveness in discussions over the local government system in recent years. One example of this variation is a method to make decisions regarding splits or mergers of local government units. In the Czech Republic or Slovakia, such a decision has to be approved by the local referendum. Polish law, however, is still vague about “public consultations”, while final decisions still belong to central authorities.

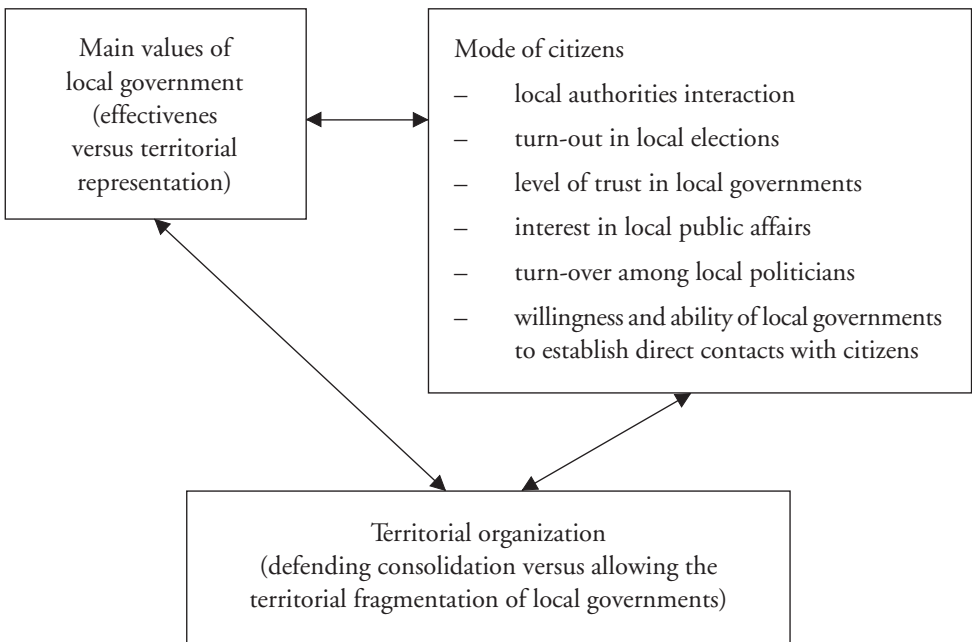
One may expect that in countries in which more attention is paid to both territorial representation and the democratic values of local government, the type of relationship between municipal

authorities and local citizens will be different than in countries that concentrate on effectiveness and efficiency values. In the former group, one might expect higher levels of trust in local governments, higher turn-out in local elections, and higher levels of knowledge of local officials and of local political agendas among average citizens.

It may also be expected that local authorities in this group of countries will more often be trying to develop techniques for learning citizens' preferences and, more broadly speaking, of interactive governance. This relationship is both of a direct and indirect nature. First, seeing democracy as the most important value, local politicians and officials devote more time to better communications with the public. Second, as was explained above, this way of thinking leads to a more fragmented territorial system. In smaller local government units, there are more opportunities for building closer links between authorities and citizens. The explanatory model described above is briefly summarized in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Model Explaining Variation between Countries in the Model of Communication Between Local Authorities and Citizens



Before we verify whether the variation suggested by the model can be confirmed empirically, we want to check if regional politicians in the countries covered in this study have really different views on the most important values of local governments and local democracy. The occasion for such a check is provided by the survey organized in three of the four analyzed countries by the international research project “Local Democracy and Innovation”².

More than 1 300 mayors in the three countries were asked in the LDI survey what they thought were the most important goals of local governments. They were asked to assess, on a scale between one and five, the importance of six statements reflecting three basic values of local government. They were also asked to indicate the two most important values among these six. The question asked was what was the most important objective which local governments attempt to achieve:

(Democracy—participation values)

- that there is a good contact between residents and elected representatives,
- that residents are involved in local political issues.

(Autonomy values)

- that the municipality can make income and expenditure decisions without central government interference,
- that local priorities count more than national standards.

(Effectiveness values)

- that residents are offered the best possible services for the taxes and fees they pay,
- that municipal services are provided as cheaply as possible.

In general, resolutions to provide the best possible services and to make decisions without central government interference found the widest support from mayors. On the other extreme, sticking to traditional local preferences and to enable better involvement of citizens in local issues found only relatively modest support.

However, there are interesting differences between countries. “To provide best services” was mentioned the most often in Poland, while “to make independent decisions” was most important for Czech and Slovak mayors. In the Czech Republic and Poland, “to take into account local priorities” gained relatively modest support, while this goal was chosen far more often in Slovakia. Also, “citizens involvement in local issues” was seen as less important in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia than in Poland.

In Table 1.2, it is very evident that Polish mayors stress values related to efficiency more frequently than their colleagues in the other two countries. Slovak mayors seem to be especially attracted by the autonomy. Polish mayors stress the significance of democratic values less often their counterparts

in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. All the differences mentioned in this paragraph are statistically significant on a 0.05 level

Table 1.2
Goals of Local Government as Seen by Local Mayors
[Percent of Selections as One of the Two the Most Important]

	All countries [%]	Czech Republic [%]	Poland [%]	Slovakia [%]
Democracy	61.3	67.9	54.3	71.7
Autonomy	67.5	60.6	61.5	89.1
Effectiveness	71.2	71.4	84.2	49.2

SOURCE: Author's calculations, based on 1997 LDI project survey

More precise analysis suggests that the variation between opinions of mayors on local government values cannot be reduced to other factors, such as the size of local governments, education of mayors, etc. (see Swianiewicz, 2000). The individual country matters as a significant explanatory variable in and of itself, and probably reflects differences in the philosophies of local government reforms.

Variations in mayors' opinions confirm our earlier observations on the variation in understanding of the essence of local government and local democracy. Following the model presented in this section, we should expect that the nature of contacts between local authorities and citizens in the Czech Republic and Slovakia would differ from the situation in Poland.³ We may expect higher turnouts; higher levels of trust and higher levels of general satisfaction with local government operations, together with more frequent attempts at direct learning of citizens' preferences in the two former countries.

Citizens' Opinion About Local Governments and Their Activities

Citizens in the various analyzed countries differ greatly in the amount of information they possess on their municipal authorities. A very good illustration is provided by the comparison of the declared knowledge of any councilors in the Czech Republic and Poland. In Poland, anywhere between 33% of citizens in large towns to 76% in smaller municipalities declared they knew at least one councilor. In the Czech Republic, proportions vary in individual regions between 80% and 89%, while more than 70% declared they knew most of their councilors.

These two countries differ a great deal in territorial organization at the municipal level – the system is very fragmented in the Czech Republic, but is more territorially consolidated in Poland. The impact of the size of local government on various aspects of citizen perceptions has been found one of the most important explanatory variables. Sometimes, this may help to understand not only differences between individual municipalities, but also between the studied countries. This issue is discussed in more detail further in this chapter.

One of the rare occasions for direct comparison of citizens' opinions in various Central and East European countries is provided by the survey conducted in April 2000 in four countries in the region, (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania and Poland)⁴. Asked whether various public institutions act in the interest of the whole society, a small part of the society, or small groups only, citizens in all four countries assessed activities of local governments much better than of central institutions, such as the central government and the parliament. Czechs and Hungarians expressed the most positive opinions on local governments, while Poles and especially Lithuanians were slightly more skeptical. Detailed data are presented in Table 1.3.

It is very characteristic that more positive opinions were expressed in countries where local governments are usually smaller. Trust is usually smaller in countries where local government units are much larger.

Table 1.3
**Do You Think Local Governments in Your Town (Village) Activity
 Represent Interest of: Almost All Citizens, Most Citizens, and Small Part of Citizens
 or Very Small Groups Only?**

	Czech Republic [%]	Hungary [%]	Lithuania [%]	Poland [%]
– almost all citizens	8	12	5	12
– most citizens	43	40	27	27
– small part	24	22	26	21
– small groups only	11	20	28	27
– don't know	14	6	14	13
Total	100	100	100	100

SOURCE: “Państwo a interesy...”, 2000

Information on the level of trust in central institutions may help us to interpret the variation in Table 1.3. In the case of parliament, it is highest in Hungary (33% believing it represents most of society); moderate in the Czech Republic (24%) and in Poland (23%), and the lowest in Lithuania (10%).

In Lithuania, the level of trust in all public institutions is lower than in all other surveyed countries. But in Poland, the level of trust in parliament is almost the same as in the Czech Republic and slightly lower than in Hungary. This means that lower trust in local governments in Poland is not a result of generally lower satisfaction with state institutions. But this should be interpreted in the context of various attitudes and functions of local governments. This is especially true when comparing Poland and the Czech Republic. We will return to this issue later in this chapter.

Also, data provided in all chapters describing the situation in four countries analyzed in this book, indicate that the level of trust in local governments is usually larger than in other public institutions. Moreover, trends have been usually positive for local governments. At the beginning of the last decade in the Czech Republic, both the president and the central government enjoyed higher levels of trust. But since 1994, the level of trust in local government has been higher than in central government. Since 1998, it has also been higher than in the president. (The percentage of those trusting local governments reaches as high as 60%). In Slovakia, we have data for only two periods (51% trust in 1995 and 57% in 1997).

But the level of trust in 1997 was higher than in 1995, and much higher than in any other public institution. Also in Poland, the level of trust in local governments has been gradually growing throughout most of the decade (reaching sometimes over 60%), although since the end of 1997, it has been lower than the trust in the president.

However, at the same time turnout in local elections has been continuously lower than in parliamentary or presidential elections. The national chapters also provide other evidence that, although citizens usually trust their local governments, they do not see local politics as being as important as national politics. The best-case scenario in this regard is that the participation in local elections has not been dropping throughout the decade. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it dropped after the 1990 euphoria, but then stabilized at a relatively high level. In Poland, it has been considerably fluctuating with no clear tendency, while in Hungary it has been slightly increasing, although starting from a very low level in 1990. More precise information on turnout in local and central level elections can be found in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4
Turnout in Local and the Closest Parliament (Lower Chamber) Elections

	1990		1994		1998	
	Local	Parliamentary	Local	Parliamentary	Local	Parliamentary
Czech Rep.	74%	97%	62%	76%	58%	74%
Hungary	40%	65%	43%	69%	46%	57%
Poland	42%	63% (1989)	32%	51% (1993)	46%	47% (1997)
Slovakia	64%	95%	52%	76%	54%	84%

Satisfaction with the performance of local government administrations is usually higher than with the national bureaucracy. Questions analyzed in individual countries are not fully comparable, but it seems they are highest in Slovakia and the Czech Republic and lowest in Hungary.

We do not have information on the trend of changes in Slovakia, but it seems that the level of satisfaction has been gradually growing in the Czech Republic and in Poland, despite significant short-term fluctuations in the latter case. On the other hand, it has been rather decreasing in Hungary, reflecting—as Hajnal calls the phenomenon in this book—growing disillusionment with local democracy. In Hungary in 1991 as many as 44% of citizens thought local administration functioned better than before, while only 11% had the opposite opinion. In 2000, the proportion of satisfied citizens dropped to 36%, while the proportion of unsatisfied increased to 23%. In all three remaining countries, the number of satisfied was dramatically higher than dissatisfied throughout most of the decade.

This relatively positive picture is spoiled by the widespread fear of the corruption on a local level. In Slovakia, 47% of respondents believed it was widespread—not much different than in Poland and Hungary. However, in Hungary opinions on local government in this respect are much better than on central administration. It used to be the same in Poland, but the situation has changed unfavorably for local authorities. Since 1999, a majority of respondents has thought it has been as frequent on a local as on a central level.

Last, we can measure satisfaction with local government by the proportional number of mayors who are able to hold their position after the next local elections. We do not have data on the Czech Republic, but among remaining three countries the highest – and moreover growing—stability has been observed in Slovakia. In 1994, the turnover among Slovak mayors was about 32% and in 1998 only 24%. There was not a much higher turnover among Hungarian mayors—slightly over 30% both in 1994 and 1998.

However, it should be mentioned that in many very small villages, there is usually not much competition for the mayoral position. For example, in Slovakia in 1998 in almost one-third of all communities there was only one candidate in the election. The stability on the mayoral position has been definitely the lowest in Poland, where only 12 mayors in almost 2 500 municipalities survived throughout the whole 1990–2000 period⁵. The turnover in 1994 was over 40% and even higher in 1998, varying between 35% in the smallest communities and 90% in cities of over 100 000.

In Poland at the beginning of the 90s, the role of party politics in local government was minimal, but each of the following local elections was becoming less “local”, (i.e., they were more and more dominated by major political parties represented on the national level. This was mostly true for larger cities, but parties also become more important in smaller towns and even in some rural local governments.

But this phenomenon is still not observed in some other countries of the region. In the Czech Republic independent candidates remain very important – they took 50% of seats in all councils in 1994 and 55% in 1998. In Slovakia, political parties were very important in the first local elections in 1990, when four of the largest parties took over two-thirds of all councils' seats. In 1998, four major parties took only 50%, but in general the proportion of party councilors has been increasing (in 1990 as many as 16% of Slovak deputies were independent, while in 1998 this proportion dropped to 9%). But this phenomenon was not followed by the direct elections of mayors' in Slovakia. The Slovak authors report on increasing importance of independent (i.e., non-party) mayors -the proportion of non-party mayors increased from 26% in 1990 to 29% in 1998.

Citizens and Local Government Reform

Public opinion did not have a very big influence on the reforms of the 1990s in any of the four countries. With some oversimplification, we may say that reforms were appreciated but not desired or demanded by citizens. Also, citizen impact on subsequent reforms has not been decisive. In Hungary, there were no major changes in the local government system after 1990–91, nor has there been any great public outcry to introduce such changes.

In the Czech Republic, the major reform in the second half of the 90s was the introduction of the regional tiers of self-government. However, popular support for this reform was quite high at the beginning of political negotiations. (45% support in 1992) but dropped steadily afterwards. In 1997, the number of people who saw potential negative results from regional reform was outscoring the number of those who saw more benefits. Contrary to what one may expect on the basis of democratic theory, political elites did not decide to introduce reform when popular support for reform was relatively high. The decision on implementation was rather a result of changes in governments.

A very large proportion (49%) of Czech citizens thinks local governments have sufficient duties, while only 11% claim duties should be increased. It is very telling that as much as 40% of respondents were not able to take a position on this issue. The only change in the local government system seen as required was an introduction of the direct, popular election of mayors (70% support). But this will not be likely to have any influence on the legal system of Czech local governments in the near future.

Unfortunately, we do not have data on citizens' opinions on regional reforms in Slovakia. But the lack of major public opinion research centers' surveys on this issue suggests it has not been one the hottest issues for general public opinion. The Slovak reports state that ordinary citizens usually saw preparations for reform as a battle between political groups for the power in the future territorial areas. Similar observations seem to be true for other analyzed countries, as well.

It seems that public interest in further decentralization reforms has been relatively higher in Poland. Nevertheless, it has never been decisive for the major changes. The 1998 introduction of county and regional tiers of self-government was supported by a majority of citizens. But paradoxically, popular support was much higher a few years earlier, when the Polish government did not decide to implement the change. Bottom-up pressure from various local communities clearly contributed to the final shape of the territorial division.

In the mid-90s, most Polish citizens supported further decentralization, which probably contributed to the final transfer of responsibility for schools to local self-governments. The pressure from below has clearly contributed to some minor changes such as imposing limits on local officials' salaries. But the widespread support for reform leading to the direct elections of the mayor has not led to any legal change in this respect (in spite of long and very vigorous discussions among politicians).

Notwithstanding the differences mentioned above, there are clear similarities between the low impact of public opinion on the regional level reforms in Poland and in the Czech Republic. In both countries, the support for change was much higher a few years before than during the actual implementation of the reform. In both countries, implementation was also much more related to changes in government than to public opinion. Strangely enough, reform was supported not by the right wing and centrist political parties in Poland, but rather by the left wing in the Czech Republic. It so happened that the introduction of reform in both countries coincided with decreases in popular support. This stands as one more illustration of the top-down, elitist approach to local government reforms.

Summing up, local government systems in all four countries have been projected and implemented mostly in a top-down manner. Attention paid to public opinion regarding further changes differs from one country to another, but in general is not very high. And even if there is a consensus for change among the vast majority of citizens' (as is the case in mayoral electoral systems in Poland and the Czech Republic) it does not really effect policy change greatly. The only examples of public opinion having a decisive impact have been identified for reforms of relatively minor importance.

Citizens' Preferences and Local Governments' Actions —Dialogue, Monologue or Lack of Communication?

All national chapters in this book report that, although public opinion on local governments is usually better than on central government institutions, there is a relatively modest satisfaction level among citizens regarding local government activity. This goes together with limited feelings of inclusion in local public affairs. The solution for increasing this limited level of satisfaction with local governments' activity might be to intensify communication between local authorities

and the general public. Support for this theory is provided by the fact that both in Poland and in Slovakia, it was found that there was a positive correlation between feelings of being well informed and levels of satisfaction with local government activities.

However, it should be noted that there might be alternative explanations for the correlation noticed above. It may arise from the fact that people who are satisfied with their local government's activities feel that they are better informed. Alternatively, perhaps more satisfied citizens are more interested in local public affairs, and that is why they are better informed.

It is worth mentioning that the problems described above are not an exclusive feature of new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Monnikhof, Edelenbos and Krouwel (2000) describing Dutch local democracy write about *"growing opposition against government decision, and doubt has risen about the degree to which local governments succeed in translating popular preferences into public policy, instead of solely advancing their own political agenda... Citizens also show a low level of trust in local politicians"*.

One possible remedy for such a situation is seen in more interactive policy making. Propper (2000) reports that 87% of Dutch councils have already had some experiences in this area. Haus (2000) suggests that three trends in German local politics involve: *"(1) the establishment of referenda and the direct election of the mayor; (2) the municipal efforts in the modernization of administration inspired by the doctrine of New Public Management, and (3) the municipal experiments with more or less institutionalized forms of co-operative democracy"*.

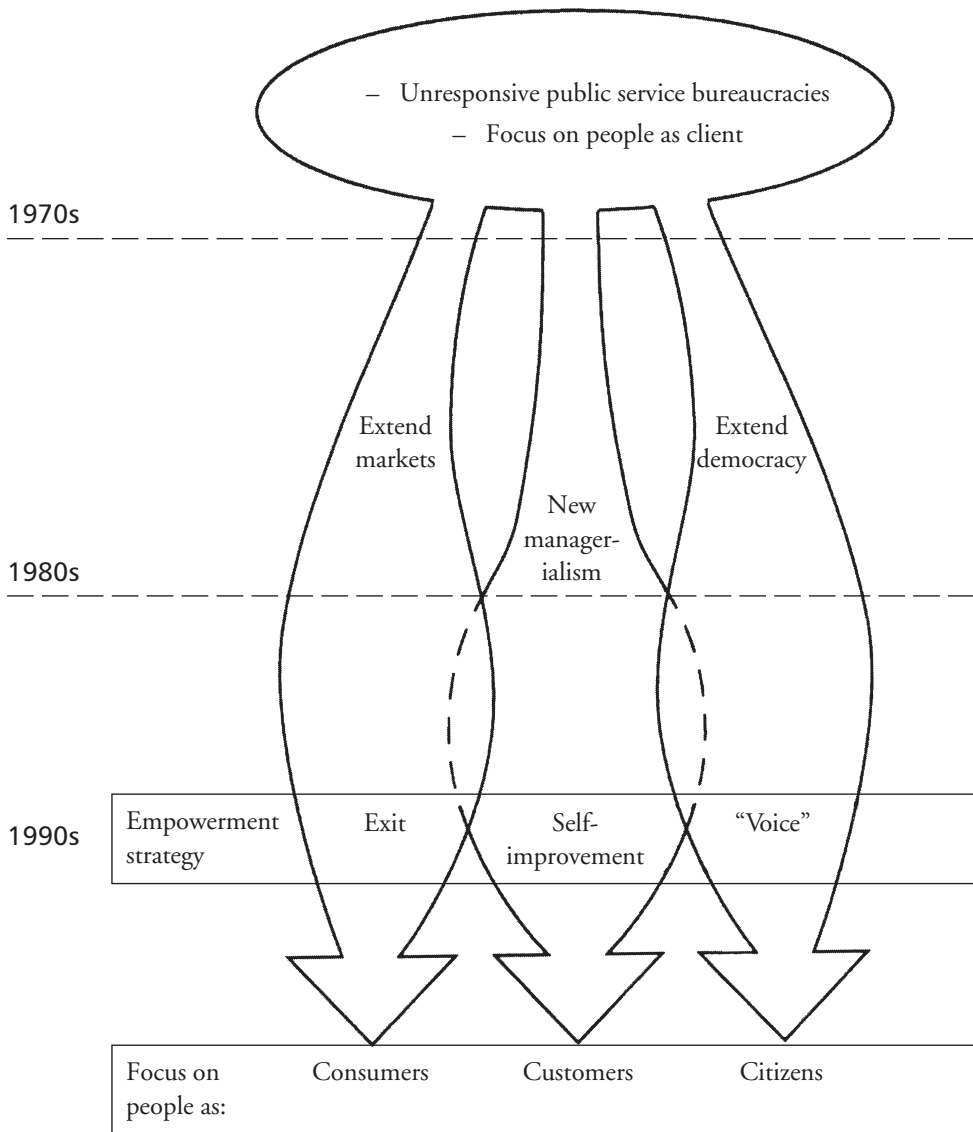
However, it should be stressed that the idea of direct involvement of citizens' in the decision making process is seen as controversial, since it may weaken certain mechanisms of representative democracy. Moreover, the idea does not offer protection from the situation in which relatively small, but active or well-organized groups exert the most influence. The opinions of the larger groups of voters who do not wish to be active between elections might be largely disregarded.

A considerable proportion of the population is simply interested in getting good quality services and is not willing to come to public meetings, answer questionnaires, or spend time expressing opinions on various policy issues in any other way. People from this part of the local community would not be active in any processes of consultation, and their preferences might be easily overlooked. This may be especially dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe, where a relatively slight tradition of civic involvement results in the low proportion of citizens who are willing to actively participate in public reforms. (This issue has been discussed at length in the Czech and Polish chapters.)

Hambleton (1998, 2001) suggests that the traditional model of local service delivery, described as *"unresponsive public service bureaucracies"* have been challenged and led to various policy and organizational changes. Hambleton suggests that three basic strategies to address this problem have included: (1) an extension of the role of the market (and parallel reduction of the role of bureaucracy) and choice for consumers in the local services' provision; (2) self-improvement of

local administrations through new managerial techniques, identified usually with New Public Management (Osborne, Gaebler 1993, Dunleavy, Hood 1994); (3) extension of democracy through the direct participation and more collective control over services (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2
Trends in Public Service Management



SOURCE: Hambleton (1998)

The third solution, described by Hambleton in particular, is the main focus of the chapters presented in this book. Obviously, the situation in Central and Eastern European countries differs considerably from this in Western European democracies. But there are also numerous similarities, and new managerial trends have been very quickly transferred to post-socialist democracies, both by foreign experts advising Czech, Hungarian, Polish or Slovak cities, and by city managers who had learned a lot from their study visits abroad.

All national chapters included in this report provide attempts made by some local governments to enliven contacts between local authorities and the general public. The organization of local public opinion surveys is just one of many examples reported from all four countries. Since information provided is based more on case studies and individual examples than on comparable statistical information, it is very difficult to make any generalizations on this phenomenon.

However, it seems that such attempts are in all four analyzed countries a relatively rare innovation, rather than the rule. It seems also that most local politicians thinking about better communication with citizens think first and foremost about how to inform the public about plans and achievements of local authorities, rather than about how councilors and local administrators can better learn about citizens' preferences. Moreover, techniques on learning citizens' preferences, such as surveys, are sometimes used not to learn how to change local policies in order to make them closer to popular expectations, but to maximize political gains for the mayor and the ruling party.

There are known examples where results of surveys were manipulated in such a way that only "convenient" results were reported to the public, and no real modification in policies occurred. Obviously, one must not extend this pessimistic observation to every local government. But it is worthwhile to stress that usage of "learning" techniques is not always sufficient proof of an inclusive style of local politics.

Another very striking feature regarding techniques of communication is the relatively widespread use of the Internet. (This has been reported in all four national chapters.) In Hungary, 22 of the 23 largest cities have their own websites, most of them offering general information on cities and access to local legal acts. More than half of them also offered the possibility of e-mail contacts with the mayor and/or other politicians.

In Poland, most cities have produced their web sites. Among over 300 cities which are county (*powiat*) capitals, it is difficult to find a city without its own web site. Such website usage is also quite frequent among small towns. Most of these focus on providing updated information for potential investors or tourists. But there are also examples of information addressed at citizens, such as precise catalogues of services, downloadable forms for various job positions, experiments with collecting feedback information from citizens through the internet, etc. Such Internet communication is also relatively widespread in Czech local governments.

The more traditional tool of direct democracy in use in all four analyzed countries is local referenda. But the frequency and purpose of referenda differ considerably from one country to another. In the Czech Republic, local referenda have been organized almost exclusively to vote on the split of local governments into two or more separate units.

Local referenda have been organized in almost 20% of all Slovak municipalities. A large proportion of them concerned rearranging administrative units. But others were organized to decide upon location of controversial investment (such as solid waste disposal plant) or upon a change of name for a local government unit.

In Poland, the most frequent local referenda dealt with dissolving local councils before the end of their official terms. It has been reported that in recent years, such referenda have been more and more frequent. There have also been an increasing number of referenda in which opposition groups were successful in mobilizing enough voters to decide an early termination of the council. (There were 72 such referenda in the first half of 2000 alone, 12 of them resulting in early termination of local council terms.) Other types of referenda are much less frequent, dealing with “self-taxation” of the local population in order to improve quality of certain local services, deciding locations of controversial investments, or exerting pressure on Warsaw to change regional or county borders.

Hungary is perhaps the only case where policy focused referenda have been recently outscoring referenda focused on administrative changes. Out of 32 referenda organized between January 1999 and September 2000, almost half (14) concerned important public investments and another 11 decisions on risky environment projects.

Regardless of reported differences, it seems that local referenda are an important and stable element of local democracy systems in all four countries. We are not able to quote precise statistics in order to support this thesis. But it does seem that it has been possible to notice a slow but gradual shift away from “formal” referenda required for redefining local authorities in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, and on the early termination of local councils’ term in Poland to “issue oriented” referenda focused on important policy decisions. (This shift has been the most visible in Hungary. But observers from the other countries have confirmed it, as well.)

What Influences the Variations Between Citizens’ Opinions?

Until now, we have been noting that the four analyzed countries differ from each other in many respects. But the essence of local government is variation, including within each country. Below, we examine how various characteristics of both territorial units and of citizens’ influence the relationship between individuals and their local governments.

First of all, we refer to three factors that are most often mentioned in chapters characterizing situations within individual countries: the size of the territorial unit; the levels of education, and the incomes of citizens. We can also make some references to variations related to the age of citizens and to the regional location of municipalities. (Unfortunately, with the exception of Hungary, available data do not allow for applying multi-factor regression models. This means we need to restrict our analysis to the impact of individual independent variables, not to those controlled by other factors.)

Observations made in Hungary suggest that the variation of citizen's opinions on local governments was relatively modest at the beginning of the decade when very high expectations were typical for almost all social groups. But later on with increasing disillusionment, opinions have become much more diversified and have depended on the citizens' income, size of local government and some other factors.

The most frequently referred to, and the clearest factor is the *size of local government*. As localist or public choice theories expect, the smaller an administrative unit, the more positive is opinion of citizens' on most aspects of local authorities' activities, they feel better informed and they know local councilors more often. In all analyzed countries the turnout in local elections is negatively correlated with the size, (i.e. citizens of small towns and villages are more interested in and more involved in local public affairs). Also, the larger city, the higher the turnout of mayors after local elections⁶, which may be interpreted by the lower voters' satisfaction with local governments' performance in big cities.

It should be noted however, that a very low-turn-out of mayors in the smallest communities may be also explained by the low level of political competition. It is relatively common that there is only one candidate in the election. Similarly, citizens of small towns and villages asked whether they trust their local governments, answer in a positive way more often than those from *big* cities do. In Slovakia, it can be noted that citizens of larger cities are more often unable to express their opinion on local government activities. But this observation has been made on a relatively small sample of municipalities.

But although in most cases the overall positive opinion is clearly related to the small size of the local constituency, the picture is not quite so one-dimensional. The level of declared satisfaction with local governments' activity is usually negatively correlated with the size, but there are some exceptions to this rule.

In the Czech Republic opinions of citizens from villages below 500 inhabitants are less positive than those from 500–2 000 population cohort—although the difference is not statistically significant, but the trend at least stops around 500 size. In Hungary, there was a clear (negative) correlation between size and satisfaction in 1990–91, but data for 2000 are not as clear. In the smallest group (below 1 000) average opinion is negative, while the most positive is in

administrative units between 2 000–5 000 citizens. Satisfaction of Hungarians with individual services provided by local governments is also related to the size in quite complicated way.

Although, the general picture is that the level of satisfaction is higher in small administrative units, there are some exceptions to this rule. For many services the highest satisfaction is found in 2 000–10 000 cohort, while satisfaction in the smallest units is slightly lower. In the case of schools, the level of satisfaction in villages below 1 000 citizens is very low. Regarding culture, the relationship with size is positive, (i.e. higher levels of satisfaction are found in larger territorial units). In the Czech Republic, declared interest in participation in local politics is the highest not in the smallest group, but in towns between 3 000–20 000.

But with regard to attitudes towards decentralization reform, the relationship is the opposite. Wherever we have data available, the more radical pro-decentralization opinions are found in larger municipalities. In the Czech Republic, citizens of small villages (below 500) usually think that present duties of local governments are sufficient, while respondents from the largest cities would wish further progress in decentralization. In Poland, citizens of large local governments units support transfer of functions to lower tiers more often than those from small territorial units for a number of duties. Finally, support for recent decentralization reform (i.e., introduction of county and regional self-government) has been considerably higher in big cities.

It is hard to formulate very definite conclusions on the basis of the data presented in this book. But it seems that citizens of small administrative units, while enjoying many positive features of their local governments, are at least partially aware that far-going decentralization of functions to very small authorities would be unrealistic, or would lead to inefficiency of service provision. However, this conclusion would require further investigation, including economic—not only sociological—analysis.

The other variable, which seems to be important, is the *level of education* of individual citizens. From many points of view, education is positively related with opinions on local governments. People with higher degrees trust their local governments more often; they feel better informed and more involved in local public affairs. This finding has been basically confirmed in each of analyzed countries.

But it is worthwhile to note that size and level of education factors often work in “opposite directions”; one may often find more educated people in big cities and less educated citizens in small villages. This means that levels of satisfaction in smaller units is higher, despite lower levels of education. Level of involvement by better-educated people is higher, despite the fact that they live disproportionately in large cities. This observation strengthens the meaning of two variables for the perception of local governments. Surprisingly enough, in the Czech Republic more educated people are more often skeptical about further decentralization of functions than those with lower education levels are quite the opposite to what one might expect, and quite the opposite to various findings in Poland.

In some cases, the opinion on local governments is also related to the *level of income* of individual respondents. In the Czech Republic, in Hungary and in some cases in Poland it is positively correlated with the level of trust and satisfaction with local governments.

In Hungary—the only country for which multi-variable analysis has been performed—in many cases the level of income has been found the most significant explanatory variable. A very interesting finding concerns the relationship between voting behavior and level of income in Hungary. It has been discovered that while rich people are more interested in national elections, poorer voters more often take part in local government elections. This explanatory variable has been found more powerful than the size of community or any other social factor.

As Gyorgy Hajnal states later in this book “*local government is business of the poor, while central election is business of the rich*”. There might be two possible interpretations of this finding. An optimistic one suggests that the existence of local government helps to reduce the social exclusion. A more pessimistic view might follow the dual state theory arguments on the role of central and local government in social life.

Following such logic, poor people are more interested in local government because they are more dependent on local services. Anyhow, even if one were to adhere to the latter explanation, we may conclude that local governments help to make politics more pluralistic. It should be added that Hungary seems to be exceptional case among the four analyzed countries. Application of a similar statistical method in Poland proved that size of municipality is much more important than citizens’ incomes as a factor explaining voter turnout.

It seems that in spite of the democratic character of local governments, the feeling of inclusion and of satisfaction is larger in groups, which traditionally form elites, (i.e. among people with higher education and higher levels of income). But the presence of local governments helps to include small towns and rural communities, which are usually less active and less satisfied with developments in the national political arena.

The other factor incidentally mentioned in national chapters is *age of voters*. In most cases, the lowest level of trust and satisfaction with local governments’ activities has been found among younger voters. Such a finding has been reported in Slovakia several times, for example. But in some cases, especially in Poland, the opposite has been found true, (i.e. the lowest level of satisfaction or the lowest interest in local public affairs among the oldest groups).

Polish findings also frequently referred to *regional variation*. The turnout in local elections is higher and some indicators of satisfaction with local government activity are better in regions with more civic traditions and better-developed civic society. Surprisingly enough, the Slovak chapter reports almost the opposite relationship: higher turn-out has been found in regions where the communist legacy is stronger and in which voting has been still considered compulsory by a majority of locals.

Conclusions

As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, individual analyzed countries placed more attention to different values of local democracy when building the local government system. The Czech Republic and Slovakia focused more attention on values related to democratic representation of local communities, while in Polish reform there has been more attention placed at issues of effectiveness in service delivery. This difference and various territorial organizations—with relatively large municipalities in Poland and strong fragmentation in remaining countries—is to some extent reflected in the relationship between local governments and the general public.

As was expected in the model presented at the beginning of this chapter, the average level of trust and the interest in local public affairs measured by the turn-out in local elections are higher in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, while the turnover of mayors is definitely highest in Poland. On the other hand, the Polish local government system may allow for the most effective decentralization of the widest range of services. But this issue exceeds the scope of this chapter. Differences between countries discussed in this paragraph may be perhaps related to the difference of “philosophical assumptions”, and of territorial organization of analyzed countries.

But despite numerous, detail differences identified above, the general picture of local government-citizen relationships is quite similar in all four analyzed countries. At the same time, this picture is by no means very simple. It would be wrong to assume that the very existence of local governments does not matter for public opinion. Most people are more satisfied with local than with central authorities' activities. They think their municipal administration works quite well. And they think local authorities try to represent interests of whole local communities, not only of small, selected groups.

But it would be equally simplistic to believe in an ideal picture of local government: beloved, trusted by everyone and mobilizing local communities for joint activities for public interest. First, positive opinions quoted in the previous paragraph are not univocal. Numerous citizens decide to stay uninvolved, and they are not able to make their own opinions about local governments' performance. There is a quite widespread fear of local corruption, although it should be noted that at least in Hungary (but not in Poland) there is a general conviction that local self-government administration is more fair than the central one. Turnout in local elections is usually considerably lower than in parliamentary ones and—especially—than in presidential elections in Slovakia and Poland. This is just another example of a generally low level of involvement and perception of relatively low importance of local politics.

What is worth stressing is that the overall trend in perception of local governments is not negative. Moreover, on some dimensions—such as levels of trust—it is rather positive and to large extent stable. By contrast, the support for central political institutions (government, parliament, and president) shows considerable fluctuations even over a relatively short time. In some cases, we noted very high expectations towards local governments at the beginning of the transition period,

so there was some disappointment shortly afterwards. But then the level of trust, satisfaction and interest in local governments has stabilized at the level which has been perhaps far from desired, but it has been not disastrous either.

Last but not least, the attitudes of individual citizens are highly diversified. The views of some of them may be called “active appreciation”, others “passive approval” and others “distrustful withdrawal” from local public affairs. Each of these three groups is large enough to be noticed and to protect us from easy simplifications.

Practical Recommendations

Are there any practical recommendations steaming from the study? They can be summarized in following points:

- *Local governments in analyzed countries are well established and recognized democratic institutions.* This is so in spite of the numerous drawbacks of local democracy reported above. Therefore, the further strengthening of local governments’ positions seems to be a wise method for strengthening the overall democratic system.
- *More information on decentralization reforms is needed.* In most described cases, the majority of the population supported implementation of decentralization reforms. But this support sometimes evaporated over time. And there is evidence suggesting this might be at least partially because of insufficient levels of information on aims and practical consequences of introduced changes.
- *More studies are needed.* We know a lot about the techniques being used for improving communication between local governments and citizens, but there is a lack of systematic information about results of practical implementation and usage of these techniques. Therefore, the first recommendation is that more studies on these issues are required.

Moreover, we know what techniques are in use by local governments. But by operating on the case study level rather than on a level of systematic analysis, we do not know how widespread they are. This definitely requires more investigation.

- *More consultations are required, but these should not work in favor of the most active groups only.* Local governments should definitely be encouraged to undertake more exercises directed at learning about citizens’ preferences, taking these into account while formulating local policies. However, it should be noted that the process of consultation also has its traps, which should be avoided. Because usually there are some relatively small groups which are the most active in expressing their opinions, one needs to be careful that using different techniques of communication with the public does not lead to policies biased towards preferences of these groups.

- *Consider the quality of local services first.* Taking into account the relatively rare willingness of citizens to be directly involved in policy formulation, improving quality of local services might be sometimes the best strategy for improving the level of satisfaction of citizens not only with local government operations, but also with the quality of local democracy. In many instances, this might be more important than applying various forms of communication and interactive governance. Analysis provided by the Hungarian chapter suggest that citizens in localities providing better services often tend to believe their preferences have been taken into consideration in policy formulation. On the other hand, in localities with poorer services, citizens are inclined to think that their voice has not been heard.

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Notes

- ¹ For more information on comparison of the decentralisation reform in four analyzed countries see for example, Baldersheim et al. (1996).
- ² The LDI project was sponsored by the Norwegian government and co-ordinated by Harald Baldersheim from the University of Bergen, Norway.
- ³ It is much more difficult to formulate definite conclusions about Hungary, for which we do not have similar information on local politicians' values. Taking territorial fragmentation into account, one may expect Hungary should be more similar to the Czech and the Slovak Republic than to Poland. But after observing Hungarian discussions on local governments over the last decade, one may notice much attention being attached to the decentralisation of services and the efficiency of their delivery.
- ⁴ The survey was conducted based on a representative sample of local populations in April 2000 by IVVM in the Czech Republic, by TARKI in Hungary, by VILMORUS in Lithuania and by CBOS in Poland. Unfortunately, Slovakia, the fourth country analysed in this book, was not included in the quoted survey.
- ⁵ It should be added that some mayors chose political carrier in higher-tier local governments after the 1998 reform. However, this relatively small number does not change the general picture of high proportion of mayors loosing positions as a result of subsequent elections.
- ⁶ Data on the Czech Republic are missing, but there is no reason to believe the situation differs significantly there from the other three countries.

Public Perception of Local Government in the Czech Republic

Jaroslav Borecký

Libor Prudký

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1. INTRODUCTION

After giving a short historical background of self-government in the Czech Republic, we focus on restoration of self-government after 1989 and on the local government reform still being carried out. The introduction finishes with a short statistical description of communities in the Czech Republic.

We list here a short glossary of terms used:

- *community* (Czech: “obec”): the basic and lowest territorial self-government and administrative unit (the term *municipality* is not adequate in the Czech context, as it is associated with a town or a bigger settlement, but “communities” in the Czech Republic are mostly very small);
- *council* (Czech: “zastupitelstvo”): the representative body of a self-government unit (community or region);
- *councilors* (Czech: “zastupitelé”—deputies): the members of the council, who are directly elected by local citizens;
- *board of councilors* (Czech: “rada zastupitelstva”): the executive body of the council elected from within and by its councilors;
- *community authority* (Czech: “obecní úřad”): the administrative decision-making institution of a community;
- *mayor* (Czech: “starosta”, in statutory towns “primátor”, e.g. in Prague): the head of the community council and of the community authority, elected from within and by the council;
- *district* (Czech: “okres”): the middle-level territorial state administrative body larger than a “community” and smaller than a “region”;
- *district authority* (Czech: “okresní úřad”): the institution exercising state administration within a district;
- *region* (Czech: “kraj”): the mid-level territorial self-government and administrative unit with respect to state administration. A region is composed of districts;
- *regional authority* (Czech: “krajský úřad”): the administrative institution of a region;
- *governor* (Czech: “hejtman”): the head of the regional council and of the regional authority, elected from within and by the council.

1.1 Historical Framework of Self-government Development in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic

In 1990, after 50 years, community self-government was restored in Czechoslovakia. Such self-government was first implemented in 1850, but was abolished definitively at the end of 1948. In that year, National Committees at the regional, district, and community level were established by law. These institutions operated under the total oversight of the Communist Party until 1989.

In June 1990, the Federal Assembly passed the constitutional act, which shortened the five-year election period of national committees and renewed the constitutional foundations of local self-government. In September of that year, the Czech National Council passed the Communities Act and the Act of the Capital, Prague. Under these laws, the first local elections were held in November 1990. (Subsequent elections happened in 1994 and 1998.)

1.2 Restoration of Local Self-government After 1989

At the time of writing, there are 6 251 communities in the Czech Republic: almost one third more than in 1990. After Czechoslovakia was formally divided into two separate states, the Constitution of the Czech Republic became effective in January 1993. In one of its Articles, self-government of territorial self-government units is guaranteed. These units are defined as territorial corporations of citizens with the right to self-government, and also as legal corporations, which may have property of their own and operate according to their own budgetary abilities. The territorial self-government units are categorized as “regions” (mid-level) and “communities” (base level).

Since the beginning of 2000, there are 14 regions, one of which is Prague. (Prague actually enjoys special status being both a region and a community.) Councils elected for a four-year term control regions and communities. As mentioned earlier, the last elections to community councils were held in 1998. Terms in office are now for four years, including for Prague City Council. Elections to all other 13 regional councils were held on 12 November 2000, and their term will end in 2004.

1.3 Legal Framework Outline of Local Self-government Reform

The majority of communities in the Czech Republic are relatively small: 28% of communities have less than 200 inhabitants. Sixty percent of all communities have less than 500 inhabitants, and almost 80% of all communities have under 1,000 inhabitants. The new Communities Act, which took effect in November 2000, does not yet allow for the formation of any new communities

with less than 1,000 inhabitants. This means that any further structural divisions of communities will happen only in exceptional cases. (It has yet to be resolved, however, whether such a regulation is constitutional.)

The status of “town” belonged to 505 communities in 1999, although the majority of these communities had that status well before 1948. Even under communism, these towns never lost their status. The new Communities Act states that a community can become a town if it has at least 7 000 inhabitants. But in a quarter of the towns mentioned above, there are fewer inhabitants.

The recent Communities Act and other legal regulations should force communities to integrate. Of course, this is only possible if mutual agreement is reached. Even if a smaller community chooses to integrate with a bigger one, its effort will not succeed if the bigger community is not interested in such a development.

The executive organ of community self-government is the Board of Councilors. The topmost official in the community is the mayor, who is also the head of the Community (Municipal) Authority. Members of the Board, as well as the mayor, are elected by the Council from within its members (councilors). Comparable authorities, (i.e., the Board of Councilors and the Governor —“hejtman”), are elected by Councils of the 13 regions.

Activities and duties of territorial self-government in communities and regions are conducted in accordance with local law. There is a well-established Czech tradition of differentiating between self-government and the delimited activities of state administration. On one hand, the Community (or Regional) Authority performs tasks given by community (or regional) council and its organs, and on the other hand, it performs a part of state administration tasks defined by the law (so called delimited activities).

The most important tasks of independent activities of local self-government (i.e. those resulting from responsibilities and duties of community self-government) are as follows:

- Any given community should take care of the overall development of its territory, and of the needs of its citizens, and,
- Any given community should take care, “in accordance with local possibilities and local practice”, to create conditions for the development and well being of its citizens. This should best be expressed through meeting requirements in housing, protecting and improving health, regulating transport and traffic issues, disseminating relevant public information, ensuring proper education, promoting overall cultural development, and maintaining peace and public order.

The duties of community self-government are thus stated rather vaguely. The wording mentioned above, “in accordance with local possibilities and local practice”, further complicates the ability to define clearly the responsibilities of community self-government. Furthermore, the bigger the

community, the more state administration activities are delegated to it. This means that the responsibilities and fields of activities differ to a great extent from one community to another.

- There are activities that are fully the responsibility of the individual community, (e.g. protection of public order via establishing and overseeing a local police force, announcement of ordinances, waste disposal, etc.) Of course, there are also activities in which a community government is forced to engage and execute its influence, (e.g. local post offices' working hours and range of services, improving health care, etc.), and,
- The community authority (“obecní úřad”), the community’s administrative institution, is headed by the mayor. The elected councilors, especially members of the Board, are responsible for, or may even be heads of, certain sections of the administration. In small villages, the councilors do the administrative work themselves. This means that the citizens view the local council not only as a policymaking body, but also as an executive and administrative organ. There is usually not a great distinction made between these two modes of self-government functioning.

The rights of citizens with regard to the self-government of communities and of newly established regions are as follows:

- Citizens have the right to elect councilors, and to submit complaints, petitions and data for councilor interpellations. They can also do it as part of diverse activities of citizen associations and nonprofit organizations;
- In addition to the right to make direct contact with councilors, citizens have the right to attend regular council proceedings. (Of course, cases have occurred when the council calls for a “working meeting” to which the public is not invited. But it has never happened that the authorized supervising state organ would intervene, though it is obligated to do so under law.) At routine council proceedings, citizens have the right to express their opinions on agenda items, but only if they comply with established rules of procedure as issued by individual councils. Consequently, the practical meaning of this right can differ dramatically from one community to the other.

1.4 Basic Statistical Data on Communities with Respect to Their Size

To help better understand respective influences of community size on the subjects presented in this report, we list here a few examples of basic statistical information on the structure of communities in the Czech Republic with respect to their size. (The community size is measured by the number of its inhabitants.) In the table below, that structure is presented for 11 size categories of communities, listing the number of communities of that size and the number of inhabitants living in such communities.

Table 2.1
Structure of Communities in the Czech Republic by Size

Size Category [Number of Inhabitants]	Communities			Inhabitants		
	Num.	[%]	Cumulative [%]	Num.	[%]	Cumulative [%]
up to 199	1 744	27.9	27.9	213 466	2.1	2.1
200–499	1 987	31.8	59.8	643 709	6.3	8.3
500–999	1 242	19.9	79.6	867 037	8.4	16.8
1 000–1 999	652	10.4	90.1	901 775	8.8	25.5
2 000–4 999	352	5.6	95.7	1 077 526	10.5	36.0
5 000–9 999	135	2.2	97.9	931 277	9.1	45.0
10 000–19 999	66	1.1	98.9	929 334	9.0	54.1
20 000–49 999	44	0.7	99.6	1 300 774	12.6	66.7
50 000–99 999	17	0.3	99.9	1 252 821	12.2	78.9
from 100 000 up	4	0.1	100.0	978 632	9.5	88.4
Prague	1	0.0	100.0	1 193 270	11.6	100.0
The Czech Republic	6 244	100.0		10 289 621	100.0	

SOURCE: [1] Small Lexicon of Communities of the Czech Republic (current data from 1 January, 1999)

- From a total of 6 244 communities (as of 1 January, 1999), 59.7% have less than 500 inhabitants. Only 8.3% of the total population of the Czech Republic live in communities of that size. A further 30.3% of all communities range from 500 to 1 999 inhabitants: 17.2% of the total national population. Nearly one-quarter of the entire Czech population of live in communities with less than 2 000 inhabitants. These now make up 90% of all communities;
- 21.1% of the total population live in five big cities (i.e., with 100 000 or more inhabitants). First among these is Prague, with 1 193 270 inhabitants (11.6 % of total population). The second biggest city is Brno, with 384 727 inhabitants (3.7% of total population), and is the center of the region of the same name. A further 12.2% of citizens live in 17 cities with populations varying from 50 000 to 99 999. In total, about one third of all Czechs live in communities with 50 000 or more inhabitants (Communities of this size represent 0.35% of the total);

- There are 267 communities with 5 000 and more inhabitants (only 4.3% of all communities), but 64.0% of the total population lives in them. Furthermore, 55% of all the population live in 132 communities with 10 000 or more inhabitants, (i.e., in only 2.1% of all communities).

The last facts indicate the current high level of urbanization in the Czech Republic. Of course, that level of urbanization is not uniform over the whole territory, but varies with respect to the current regional self-government structure. (More detailed data can be found in *A Small Lexicon of Communities* [1]. For the purpose of this study, however, the following facts are sufficient for understanding variations of urbanization levels. (We do not deal here with Prague, which—as a community with over one million inhabitants—forms a self-government region.)

- Differences with respect to ratios of communities with 5 000 and more inhabitants occur among individual regions. Besides the region Ostrava (10.7% of all communities with 75.6% inhabitants), the next highest ratio is in the Ústí nad Labem region, namely 74.2% of inhabitants in 27 communities of that size (7.6%). The opposite extreme is experienced by the Central Bohemia region (2.8% of such communities with 44.9% of all inhabitants), and the Jihlava region, where 48.9% of its population live in 17 communities of that size, or 2.3% of all communities in the region.

2. PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT —A NATIONAL LEVEL VIEW

Without outlining the various problems which inhabitants of Czech communities might live with, it is impossible to generalize about their reactions to council activities in a meaningful way. Therefore, we instead have chosen to present here selected results of longitudinal surveys, focusing on the structure and size of problems influencing the normal lives of Czech citizens. In doing so, we have relied on select results of *IVVM* [2] and of the research paper “*Public Politics and Its Actors*” [3].

The structure and dynamics of everyday problems of Czech citizens in recent years are detailed in Table 2.2, which shows the percentage of citizens who consider the problem in question as “very pressing” (sorted by last column).

Table 2.2
Trends in Perception of the Relative Importance of Common Problems
[in Percentage Who Considered Following Problems “Very Pressing”]

Problem	92/X	93/III	93/X	94/IV	94/X	95/IV	96/IV	97/V	97/X	98/V
Corruption, economic crime			70	76	77	73	70	83	79	82
Organized crime			68	76	73	66	68	68	65	71
Common crime	73	81	83	85	79	76	72	68	65	70
Health service		59	55	45	46	56	54	75	74	65
Social safety		55	48	57	59	60	53	55	59	60
Economical reform	69	58	53	47	42	41	33	61	53	58
Unemployment	44	42	40	47	42	37	26	32	38	55
Law functionality		51	45	47	48	48	39	53	58	55
Living standards	54	57	52	58	54	54	49	48	50	54
Housing and rents			32	39	41	43	49	50	41	44
Agriculture	56	44	37	42	45	41	36	39	39	39
Educational system		46	36	35	35	36	28	42	40	36
Environment	55	66	51	57	48	52	50	38	37	36

SOURCE: Reflection of Social Changes in Public Meaning 1990–1998 [4]

- The most pressing problems in the views of Czech citizens in the past ten years are seen as crime, corruption and safety. About 80% of inhabitants feel that these problems are now endemic in their country. The prevalent majority of inhabitants consider these problems as poorly resolved;
- The second position is occupied by problems connected with social issues, (i.e., social security, health services and health care, unemployment, etc.). These problems are seen as slightly less pressing, being mentioned by 60% of those surveyed;
- The other problem areas are even less weighty, though still important: about 50% of inhabitants of The Czech Republic consider them as very pressing. These are problems connected with economic and legal reform, and,
- Even less important are problems of living standards, housing and rental levels, the educational system, agriculture and environment (The last has declined over time in its perceived importance.)

The outline of the state and development of most pressing problems for the Czech population during the years 1992 and 1998, as shown in Table 2.2, indicates two major recent developments:

- Citizens of the Czech Republic do not regard self-government issues as among the most pressing problems facing the country;
- Although the problems listed are of a fairly general nature, their percentage levels represent the urgency of tasks not only for bodies on a central or regional level, but for local self-governments, too. As mentioned in the Introduction, citizens do not distinguish between state, administrative and local self-government with regard to dealing with these problems. The citizens assume representatives of both the local self-government and the state are responsible for these social problems. That is why these problems should be perceived as matters that should be addressed at the community level, too.

Research conducted by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, Prague, was more comprehensive and far more directed towards problems of public administration. It gives an outline of the weight of specific problems in citizens' lives. This is offered not only with respect to their relevance, but also with respect to the level of satisfaction with attempts to solve them.

For each problem in Table 2.3, its perceived importance and current levels of concern are shown (1 = worst; 5 = best). In the last column, a "tension index" is shown as a ratio of perceived importance over satisfaction. The table is sorted by "descending tension index".

Table 2.3
"Tensions" Regarding Social Problems in the Czech Republic (1995)

Problem	Importance	Satisfaction	Tension Index
Restricting crime	4.47	1.71	2.61
Actions against corruption, (insider share trading, etc.)	4.09	1.58	2.59
Reform of social security system	4.20	2.37	1.77
Care of environment	4.25	2.41	1.76
Care of families with children	4.26	2.54	1.68
Health care system	4.57	2.73	1.67
Housing problem	4.20	2.51	1.67
Development of school system and education	4.24	2.64	1.61
Solving minority problems	3.35	2.34	1.43
Unemployment	3.80	2.69	1.41

Table 2.3 (continued)
“Tensions” Regarding Social Problems in the Czech Republic (1995)

Problem	Importance	Satisfaction	Tension Index
Economical reform, incl. market development	4.05	2.89	1.40
Development of democratic political system	4.01	2.88	1.39
Defense	3.49	2.64	1.32
Supporting development of towns and communities	3.69	2.81	1.31
Citizen awareness public affairs	3.90	3.02	1.29
Supporting Czech culture	3.48	2.70	1.29
Supporting cooperative and nonprofit organizations	3.09	2.61	1.18

SOURCE: Public Politics and its Actors [3]

Using factor analysis with regard to perceived problem importance, four groups (“factors”) of associated problems, (“public interests”), were created:

- The most important group consists of problems connected with crime and corruption. Closely associated were problems connected with reform of social security systems, care for the environment and solving housing problems. This factor can be named *“Acute problems with strong psychological impact on individuals and social groups”*.
- The second factor, *“Long-term general public interests”*, joins problems of minorities, defense power, support of nonprofit organizations and Czech culture, problems of unemployment, and support of development of towns and communities.
- Third in order of importance is *“Long-term development problems of individuals and groups”*: this includes general care of school systems, care of family and health care systems, and,
- Last factor, *“Interest in political and economical transformation”* deals with problems relating to democracy development, including sufficient dissemination of information to citizens about public affairs, and economical reform and market development.

Factor analysis, with respect to satisfaction of solving the problems, provides rather a different view.

- In the first factor, *“Public interest in citizens’ existence and development opportunities”*, the following problems were most prominent: satisfaction with solving of housing problems; care for families with children; health care; school systems and education; unemployment, and social security reform.
- The second factor *“Public interests in development of social and political system transformation”*, is concerned more with social and cultural issues, i.e. support of towns and communities,

support for cultural activities, environmental protection, and nurturing of democratic principles and civic values.

- “*Public interests, strongly demonstrated at present*”, which involve actions taken against corruption, in fighting crime, and also deal with problems associated with economic reform.
- The last factor, “*Latent public interests with low relevance*”, puts together the solving of minorities’ problems and support of nonprofit organizations. That connection is very realistic.

As to significant influences on the above-mentioned problems, we have at our disposal data connected with two of them, which are essential for the subject matter treated in this report:

- “Supporting development of towns and communities” is significantly more felt by inhabitants of small communities (i.e. with populations of less than 500) and medium ones (i.e., with populations between 1 500 and 3 000), as well as by citizens over 60 years of age.
- “Supporting cooperative and nonprofit organizations” is significantly more perceived as a pressing problem by people with higher education levels. Such people also tend to be more dissatisfied with the situation in this field—as opposed to people with secondary school education levels, who are more frequently satisfied in this regard.

On the basis of the knowledge derived from these two research papers (*IVVM* [2] and *Faculty of Social Sciences* [3]) we can deduce that the problem of local self-government ranks among the most important problems in Czech society, even though it is not regarded as such by the public at large. Of course, such problems by their nature require very close cooperation between citizens and self-government.

From the above data, we can draw a few general starting points for the analysis of relations between the various self-government bodies and citizens in the Czech Republic:

- Above all, it turns out that citizens understand public policy problems in mutual connections, i.e. not as singular ones, but as linked together.
- It cannot be said, that any one of the problems is seen as “solved” in any meaningful sense.
- Prominence is given to two problems, namely, safety and security.
- Czech citizens do not expect much improvement in councils’ behavior toward democratic ways, nor do they often expect much future improvement in councils’ ability or desire to provide information about public affairs.
- It may seem that citizens do not yet understand that the success of social reform depends heavily on their will to take part in the life of their community. But the development of problem evaluation by citizens may suggest their growing ability to offer constructive criticism.

2.1 Public Opinion on Local Governments Throughout the 1990–2000 Period

We analyze public opinion on local government from four different, but interlinked points of view, namely:

- *Citizens' level of trust* in their local governments, and its comparison with trust levels in other constitutional bodies.
- *Citizens' knowledge of their councilors.*
- *Citizens' levels of satisfaction* with local governments' performances, including in the way they generally handle citizens' affairs, and in the way they provide various local services to their citizens.
- *Citizens' willingness to participate in public affairs.*
- *Citizens' approach to local elections*, especially their readiness to participate in such elections
- *Picture of local self-governments in media.*

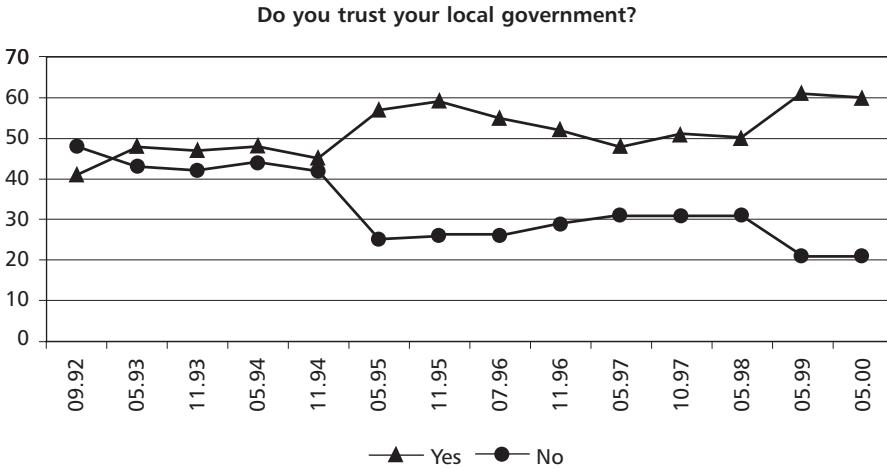
As the main source of data, surveys of IVVM [2] were used. The particular IVVM reports are quoted by this abbreviation (IVVM) accompanied with the date of the report, in which the data were presented.

2.1.1 How Much Do Citizens Trust Their Local Governments?

In the IVVM reports, citizens' levels of trust in their local governments have been quantified since 1992. The question asked was: "*Do you trust your local government?*" (IVVM 5 June, 2000). On the following Figure 2.1, the answers "certainly yes" and "generally yes" are shown as "yes", and the answers "generally not" and "certainly not" as "no".

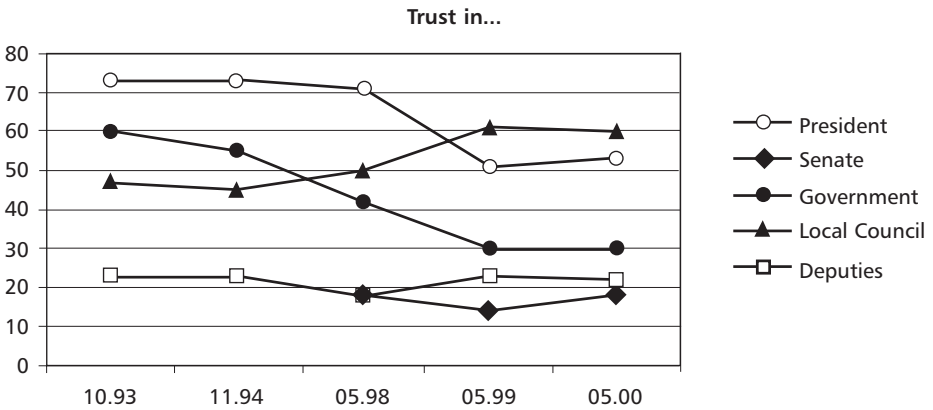
The development curve of trust in local governments indicates growing trust in general. The changes in trust are firmly linked with dates of local elections (November of 1994 and of 1998): the lowest trust levels are seen before elections, with the highest after them. It can also be observed that after the elections, the level of trust started each time at a higher percentage, resulting in long-term growth. Thus, the current level of trust in local governments in the Czech Republic was at its highest in the 1999–2000 period.

Figure 2.1
Development of Trust in Local Government From 1992 to 2000



Comparing levels of trust in local governments with that in the nation’s highest constitutional bodies, we see that local governments are trusted much more than the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Parliament, and far more than the national government. This is shown in Figure 2.2, based on answers to the question “Do you trust those who now control Czech society?” (IVVM 25 SEP 2000, 2 NOV 1994, 7 OCT 1994). Percentages of “yes, I certainly do” and “yes, I generally do” answers are shown and the appropriate data about trust in local governments are added.

Figure 2.2
Development of Trust in Constitutional Bodies From 1993 to 2000



At the time being, the level of trust in local governments is practically at the same level as the trust in the President (which is now at either stagnation or falling levels). The overall positive views towards local government is even more striking if we compare levels of distrust. Only distrust of the President is substantially lower than distrust of local governments.

To summarize long-term characteristics of trust (and distrust) levels in the President, parliamentary chambers, national government and local self-governments, we can say:

- the highest level of trust is enjoyed by the President of the Republic, though that trust falls a little or stagnates;
- second place is held by local councils with a distance of about 10% to 20%; trust in them has grown substantially and before four years it overtakes the trust in national government;
- following this is trust in the national government, though it has grown a little in the last year;
- deeply behind the third rank is the level of trust in the Chamber of Deputies, which is notoriously low;
- even lower is trust in the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament, which did not find much empathy among most citizens.

As to the current state of trust in local governments (May 2000), the results of IVVM survey [2] give the following picture:

- among 60% of citizens expressing trust in local governments, 9% gave the answer “certainly yes” and 51% “generally yes”;
- among 21% citizens distrusting local governments, 15% gave the answer “generally no” and 6% “certainly no”, and,
- the answer of the remaining 19% was “don’t know”.

Levels of trust in local government are considerably influenced by the size of the community where the respondent lives. In communities with a population under 5 000 inhabitants, the percentage of trust is significantly greater, and especially in communities of under 2 000 inhabitants, even the answer “certainly yes” is significantly greater. On the contrary, in biggest communities (over 100 000 inhabitants) the ratio of trusting citizens is significantly lower and the ratio of “don’t know” answers is higher, too.

The level of trust is also greater among people between 45 and 49 years of age, among women, among people with higher education levels, and among those who consider their living standards as “good”. Regional differences stood out only in eastern Bohemia, where the level of trust in local government is significantly higher than in the other seven regions of the Czech Republic.

On the supplementary question asking about the reasons behind such widespread distrust, those who expressed their distrust in their answer to the previous question consistently mentioned the following causes:

- bad work (performance) of local government (25% of them);
- local government gives preference to own or group interests, instead of the interests of the community and its citizens (20%);
- inadequate composition of the council (19%);
- local government's lack of interest in the community and its citizens (14%), and,
- local government informs citizens insufficiently about public affairs (7%).

The research work *“Public Policy and Its Actors”* from 1995 [3] showed important differences in the level of trust in local councils, based on the representative sample of ordinary citizens and public officials:

Table 2.4

Trust in Local Government as Expressed by Citizens and Local Authority Officials

Trust in Local Council	Citizens [%]	Officials [%]
Certainly not	6.3	0.9
Generally not	13.2	5.0
Neither yes nor no	44.3	32.0
Generally yes	27.7	49.1
Certainly yes	4.0	11.3
Don't know	4.6	1.8

SOURCE: Public Policy and its Actors, 1995 [3]

There is an inherent problem, however, in making direct comparisons between these data and those taken from IVVM surveys because of the middle category (“neither yes nor no”), which “drains” answers from both sides. However, we can take these data as rather tending more to confirm than to refute the knowledge gained from IVVM surveys. Citizens who distrust local councils represent 19.5% of the sample, with the more trusting respondents calculated at 31.7%. We must also take into account that the middle answer could be given by those who would refuse to answer otherwise. Having all that in mind, we can view these results as generally conforming to IVVM data (in the same year: distrusting about 25%, trusting about 55% to 59%).

However, one is presented with an entirely different picture on trust in local self-government from members of administration (either from state or local government authorities). From the data available, we cannot differentiate between officials and council members. Thus the results (as a kind of self-reflection) can be connected with council members very freely only. Nevertheless, the administrative workers (either nominated or elected) express their confidence in local governments on so strikingly higher level that it makes us to suspect them of self-satisfaction or even self-praise: only 6% of them don't trust local governments (including the 1% who selected the answer "certainly not").

These 1995 data do not prove the inverse linear relation between levels of trust in local governments, and the size of the community in quite such an unambiguous way as the IVVM data do. The relation holds only for communities with populations under 3 000, who generally experience higher trust levels. The data show significantly lower levels of trust in local government in communities with 3 000 to 5 000 inhabitants than in communities with 5 000 to 20 000 citizens, or even in those with 20 000 to 100 000 inhabitants. Only in big towns (over 100 000) is the level of trust in local governments lower again than in communities of populations between 3 000 and 5 000 inhabitants.

2.1.2 To What Extent Do Citizens "Know" Their Councilors?

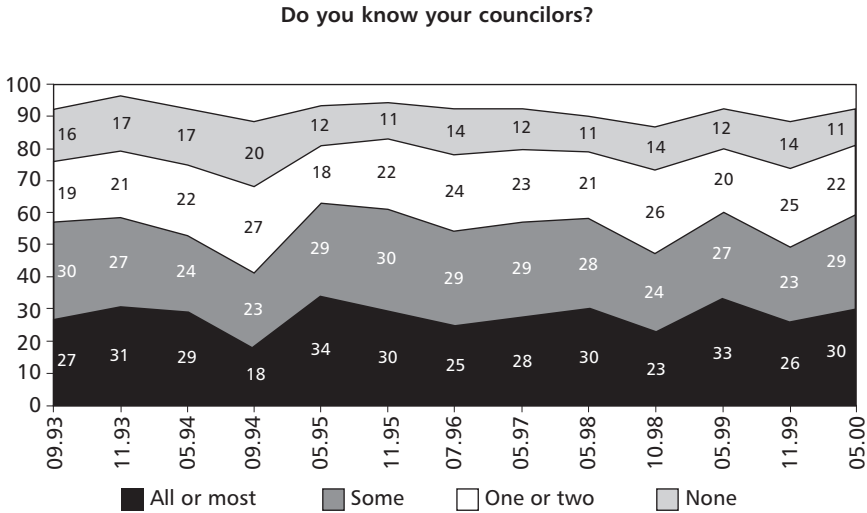
In IVVM surveys, together with level of trust in local governments, the citizen's knowledge of their local councilors was under survey since 1993: "*Do you know councilors of your local government?*" (IVVM Report, 5 JUN 2000, [2]). Figure 2.3 shows citizens' level of knowledge of their councilors. (The roundup to 100% includes those who gave no answer.)

The level of knowledge of council members is in direct proportion with the level of trust in local government; the higher the individual's knowledge, the higher the trust level.

The level of knowledge of councilors proves to depend on the same characteristics and in rather same way as the level of trust in local governments. In the first place, the knowledge of the council members falls with the growing size of the community. Further on, the expressed knowledge is significantly greater among people between 30 and 59 years of age, among men, among people with higher education levels, and among those with higher living standards. On the other, less informed side fall mostly people between 15 to 19 years of age, women, and people with lower educational levels and socioeconomic status.

From a regional point of view, central Bohemia (excluding Prague) represents the only difference, where the knowledge of council members is significantly higher in comparison with the nationwide level.

Figure 2.3
Personal Knowledge of Local Councilors by Local Citizens



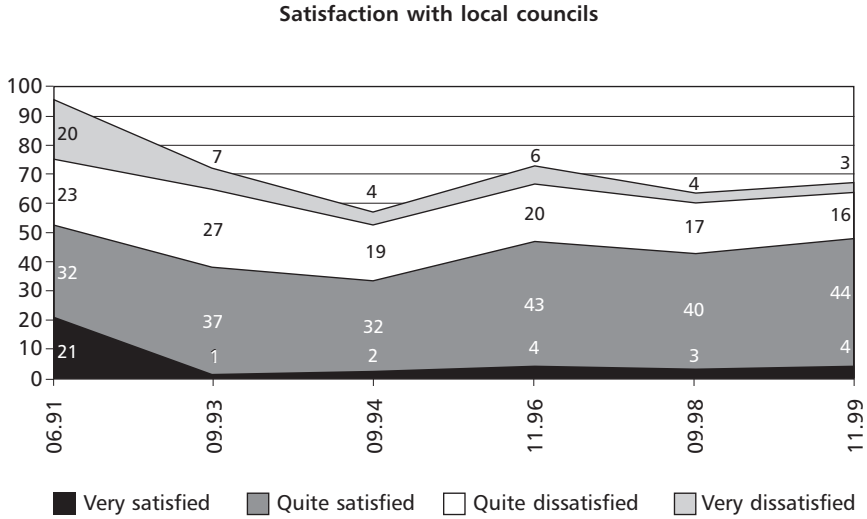
2.1.3 To What Degree Are Citizens Satisfied with Local Government Performance?

In the IVVM surveys [2], we found a number of indicators pointing to overall levels of satisfaction with local self-government. First came questions dealing with general satisfaction, then with contentment with the performances of councilors and officials, and eventually the level of satisfaction with local services. The comparison of these views, among them and in time (as well as their differentiation with respect to characteristics of communities and respondents), represent a sufficiently wide sampling to assess the level of satisfaction with local self-government in the Czech Republic during the last seven or eight years.

Developments regarding the general level of satisfaction can be seen in Figure 2.4, where respondents' answers to the question of "are you satisfied with your local council performance?" are shown (*IVVM Report, 2 DEC 1999*). (Percents summing up to 100 represent the answers "cannot draw conclusions about".)

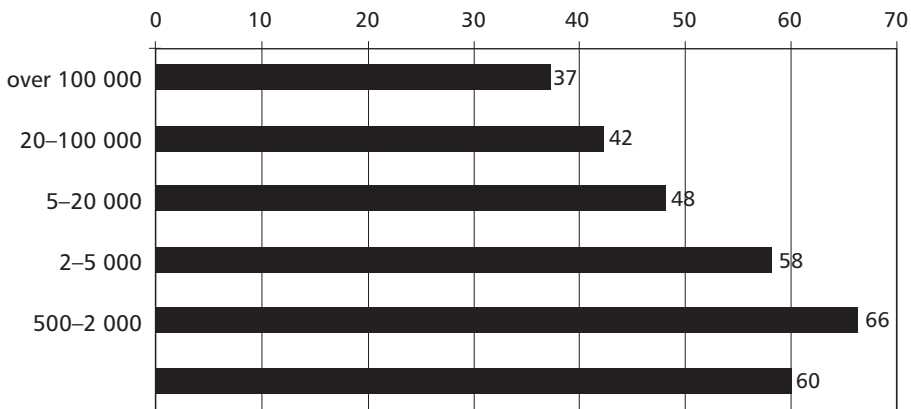
After a decrease between 1991 and 1993, the satisfaction level steadily grows. In 1999, it almost achieved its former level (51% of very satisfied or generally satisfied in 1991, to 48% of those in 1999). It is also worth noting that the percentages of extreme answers declined in favor of a growth in intermediate answers.

Figure 2.4
Development of General Satisfaction with Local Councils



The level of satisfaction with local councils was in close relation to the size of the community, as can be seen in the 1999 data depicted in Figure 2.5; a ratio of very or generally satisfied with respect to community size categories.

Figure 2.5
Ratio of Citizens Satisfied with Local Government According to Community Size



It can be seen that the satisfaction level is in reverse linear relation with the size of the community: the satisfaction grows with decline of community inhabitants¹. A similar distribution of satisfaction can be observed in previous years, too. Since 1993, the direct linear relation between the levels of satisfaction with local councils and the knowledge of councilors is also noticeable each year.

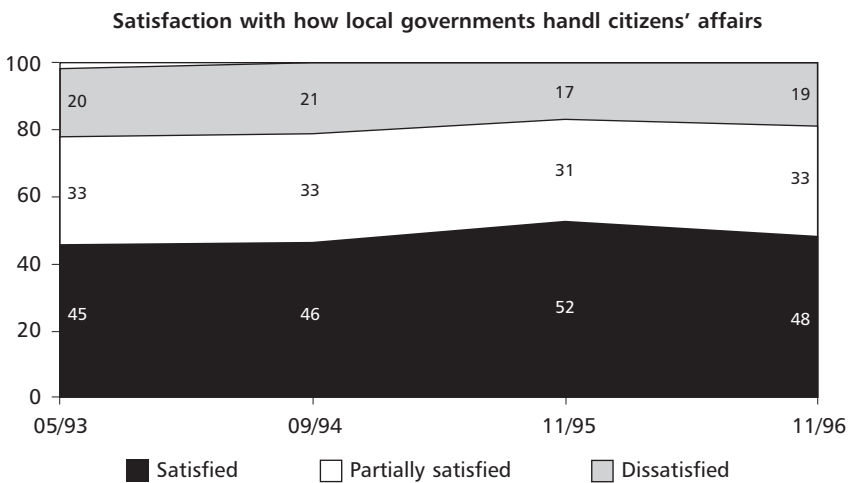
Various responses as to why so many people seem so dissatisfied with local councils, based on the 1996 and 1998 data cast another key indicator of the level of satisfaction. The most common responses were variations on the following types of grievances:

- councilors do little or nothing for the community, nothing happens in the community (40% in 1996; 39% in 1998);
- councilors are not concerned about their constituents (25% in 1996);
- councilors take care only of their own interests, and are easily corruptible (25% in 1996; 20% in 1998);
- councilors do various favors for their relatives and friends (14% in 1998);
- Councilors do not keep their promises (12% in 1998).

It can be seen that the reasons for dissatisfaction with local councils did not change much in the two years covered by the survey.

Citizen satisfaction levels with local government performances are a multifaceted phenomenon. This is clearly indicated by the answers to the question “are you satisfied with the way your local government handles your affairs?” (*IVVM Report, 17 DEC 1996*). Figure 2.6 shows results from 1993 to 1996.

Figure 2.6
Citizen’s Satisfaction with Handling of Their Affairs by Local Government

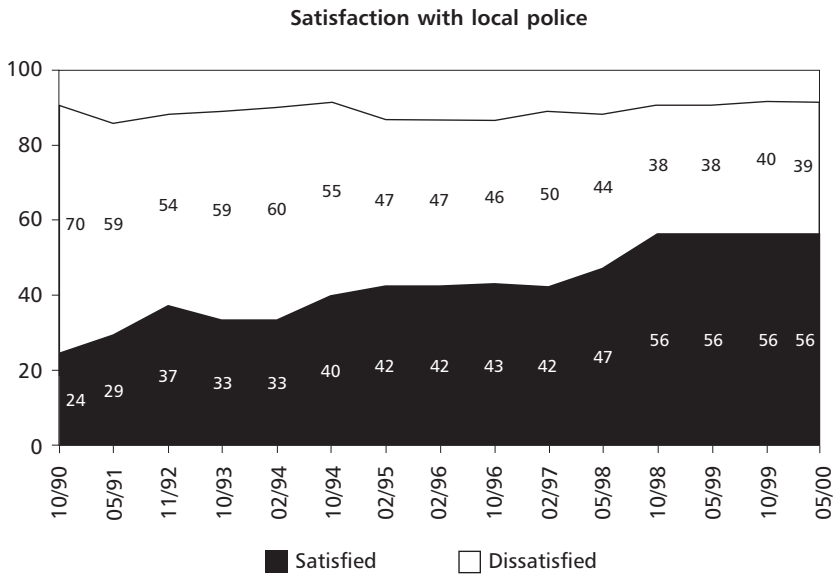


The strongest factor, which differentiates the citizens' satisfaction with the handling of their affairs by local government, is the issue of whether or not they have ever been participants in local authority proceedings (cf. local government responsibilities). The citizens who had made visits to their local authorities expressed more frequently their satisfaction with local government in this regard. This demonstrates that contact with local authority is a significant factor reducing negative attitudes towards local self-government. That correlation was observed in the years mentioned, and in subsequent years, too. (The last available data are from September, 1998.)

One of the most important aspects of community life is the issue of safety, which is obviously connected to citizens' assessment of local police performance². Figure 2.7 shows the variety of answers to the question "are you satisfied with local police performance in your domicile?" (IVVM Report, 26 MAY 2000). (Percents summing up to 100 represent the answer "don't know".)

Figure 2.7

Development of Citizen's Satisfaction with Local Police, 1990–2000



The level of citizens' satisfaction with local police performance showed a distinctly positive trend. We can consider this as an important improvement with respect to the fact that citizens have consistently regarded safety as an urgent problem in all findings (see Table 2.2), and that tension between urgency and satisfaction with safety was very significant in 1995 (see Table 2.3).

- The level of satisfaction grew steadily from 24% in 1990, to over 40% in 1995–97, to 56% from late 1998 until 2000.
- The same trend, in the opposite direction, can be observed in the changes of the level of dissatisfaction, which fell from 70% in 1990, to around 50% in 1995–97, to around 39% from late 1998 until 2000.
- The first *reversal* of satisfaction levels came at the beginning of 1995, when a near balance of satisfaction and dissatisfaction was achieved. The second reversal was observed at the end of 1998, when satisfaction significantly outweighed dissatisfaction.

The groups generally more satisfied with local police performance are represented by people of 30 to 44 years of age, by people with better living standards, by inhabitants of smaller communities (under 5 000), and by voters of a right-centrist political orientation.

Finally, we should turn our attention to the expressed levels of satisfaction with local services and living standards in Czech communities. In IVVM surveys, 17 living conditions were formulated, with the respondents being asked to voice their satisfaction with them (*IVVM Report, 12 DEC 1997*, data of September 1994 and November 1997). In the following Figure 2.8, percentages of satisfied respondents (answers “certainly yes” and “generally yes”) in both years are shown for all 17 living conditions. The respective living conditions were ranked by the relative differences between 1997 satisfaction percentages, and those of 1994 [$(\text{yes}_{1997} - \text{yes}_{1994}) / \text{yes}_{1994}$]. (The living standards with the highest relative improvement are placed at the top of Figure 2.8; those with the highest relative worsening are at the bottom.)

To draw any conclusions from relations among these 17 living conditions and between changes of their satisfaction levels is neither simple, nor easy. We would like to point out the following:

- The level of satisfaction with community living conditions grows a little: In 1997, there were 11 of 17 living conditions with higher levels of satisfaction than in 1994. The level of satisfaction remained the same in two categories, and was lower in four categories.
- Local governments are generally successful in handling with community living conditions. Among nine living conditions with increased level of satisfaction, five of them could be directly connected with initiatives taken by local governments.
- safety with highest increase of satisfaction (+13 points);
- living environment and post office functioning (both +8 points);
- disposal of household waste (+7 points);
- Street cleanliness (+5 points).
- Local government possibilities of influence on worsening living conditions are often beyond their current capabilities, mainly because of financial restrictions, e.g.:
- job (work) opportunities (–7 points);
- City transport and vicinity transport links (both –6 points).

Figure 2.8
**Changes in Citizen's Satisfaction with Local Services
 and Living Conditions From 1994 to 1997**

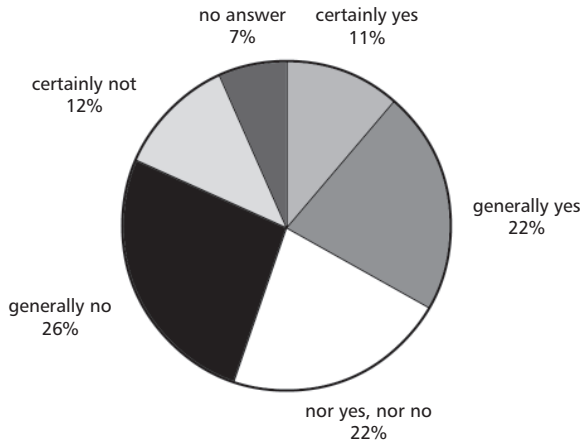


2.1.4 To What Degree Are Citizens Willing to Participate in Public Activities?

Citizen willingness to participate in public activities is an important factor in the public's ability to influence local government. It can also serve as a measurement of the effectiveness of such citizens' influence, and of the multiplicity of opportunities to exert such influence. It also indicates the level of information about public matters that citizens are provided with.

To analyze the willingness of Czech citizens to participate in public activities, we used the results of the research of the *Faculty of Social Sciences*, based on data from the year 1995. The distribution of general attitudes involved in taking part in public activities is shown in Figure 2.9.

Figure 2.9
Citizen's Willingness to Participate in Public Activities (1995)



As can be seen, willingness to participate in public activities is distributed rather evenly: the same proportion of clearly decided respondents (11.1% of “certainly yes” and 11.6% of “certainly not”) and almost the same proportions of the others (22.0% of “generally yes”, 26.3% of “generally no”, and 22.3 undecided).

As to the differentiation of that attitude, the significant socio-demographic characteristics are gender (men are more willing to participate), socioeconomic status (higher professional status implies higher interest in public affairs), and the size of respondent’s community. (This tends to be expressed as a reverse linear relation: the bigger the community, the lower a respondents’ interest). Higher willingness to participate in public activities can also be observed among those who have improved their socioeconomic status since 1989. It is also significant for those who said they would go to polls “even if they took place tomorrow”.

The important fact is that among factors differentiating the willingness to participate in public activities, there was neither the level of education, nor the level of satisfaction with local self-government or local authority performance, nor the level of satisfaction with everyday life conditions.

We get a rather different picture when we compare the results mentioned above with opinions held by public administration “professionals” (i.e., councilors and local authority officials). A citizen’s willingness to participate in public activities, as seen by those people, is shown in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5
Councilors' and Officials' Views on Citizens' Participation in Public Activities

Type of citizen participation	Office position		Political affiliation*		Total
	Official	Councilor	Independent	Party member	
Citizen takes no active interest in community life	3.8%	8.1%	0.0%	13.8%	6.1%
Citizen may criticize, but is not willing to be proactive	55.8%	54.7%	49.1%	58.6%	55.0%
Citizen only shows initiative re. "personal" matters	29.8%	25.7%	31.6%	21.6%	27.9%
Citizen is regularly active in community affairs	2.9%	6.3%	8.8%	4.5%	4.5%
Other characterization(s)	7.7%	5.3%	10.5%	1.7%	6.6%

* *This applies only to councilors*

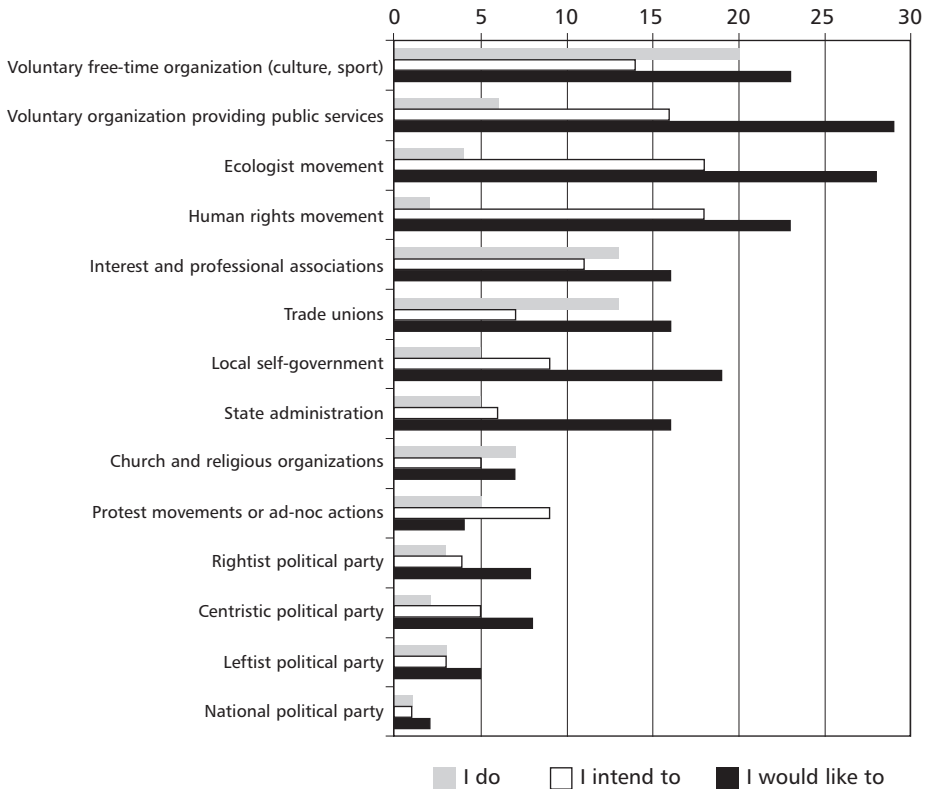
SOURCE: Faculty of Social Sciences, 1995 [3]

As the data show, about 60% of "professionals in public administration" are convinced that citizens are either not interested in community affairs at all, or interested in them as the subject of their criticism only, divorced from any feelings of potential cooperation. Only 5% of them considered the average citizen as willing to lend a constructive hand. Almost 30% of them thought that the majority of citizens started to be interested in public affairs only when their private interests were directly effected.

These data do not readily correspond with other data about the level of citizens' interest in public matters. It can be supposed that the "reality" lies somewhere within the limits that are drawn on one side by the image given by the public administration and on the other side by the manifested opinion of the citizens themselves. This discrepancy cannot be readily explained through other research findings, which show that the officials meet more frequently with complaining people than with those who are content, or are even willing to help actively.

Figure 10 shows the citizens' actual participation and their willingness to participate in 14 public activities, the list of which was given to the respondents. The answer "I do not want to take part in ..." is not shown in Figure 2.10, as it is rounded up to 100%.

Figure 2.10
Citizen's Participation in Respective Local Activities



Among the activities, in which most of the citizens are interested, as indicated by their participation in such activities, are:

- voluntary free time activities (culture, sport, etc.);
- interest and professional associations, and,
- trade unions.

Slightly less interest is attracted by the following public activities, as the percentage of participants show:

- church and religious organizations, and,
- voluntary organization providing public services.

An interesting result was obtained using factor analysis, which divided the 14 public activities into four groups with respect to citizens' participation or their interest in participation.

- Factor A: “*Humanitarian and spiritual participation*” as it joined the following activities: human rights movement, ecological movement, voluntary organization providing public services, and church and religious organizations.
- Factor B: “*Power and state-forming participation*” grouped together participation in local self-government, state administration, rightist political party, centrist political party, and national political movement.
- Factor C: “*Oppositional participation*” was composed of protest movements or ad hoc actions, leftist political party, and trade unions.
- Factor D: “*Independent participation of common interest*” covered voluntary free-time organization (culture, sport) and interest and professional associations.

Table 6 shows the level of participation with respect to the four extracted factors: the average percentages of the four degrees of participation in each factor.

Table 2.6
Citizens' Willingness to Participate in Public Activities

Factor (abbr.)	Participating in Public Activities [%]			
	I do	I intend to	I would like to	I do not want to
A (humanitarian ...)	4.7	14.2	21.7	59.4
B (power ...)	3.2	5.0	10.6	81.6
C (oppositional ...)	7.0	6.3	7.4	79.3
D (independent ...)	16.5	12.5	19.5	51.5

SOURCE: Faculty of Social Sciences, 1995 [3]

Independent associations (factor D) play the most significant role in citizens' participation. These engage in the highest actual participation and the second highest potential participation (“I intend to” and “I would like to”). The second highest actual participation rate belongs to oppositional participation (C), though it has the lowest potential participation of all four factors. The other two tendencies have similar low actual participation rates, but they differ in potential levels: the power participation (B) category has the second lowest potential, in contrast to humanitarian participation (A) with the highest potential of all.

As to citizens' willingness to participate in local self-government or in state administration, the socio-demographic characteristics which differentiate this significantly are age (higher willingness

is observed among people of 18 to 44 years of age); socio-economic status (more interest is among entrepreneurs and workers), and the size of the community of domicile (significantly greater willingness is found to be in communities with populations of between 3 000 to 20 000 inhabitants).

2.1.5 How Do Citizens Regard Local Elections?

Without a doubt, local elections are the most important means by which citizens can influence their local governments. Elections to local (community) governments have been held three times in the Czech Republic since 1989 (1990, 1994, and 1998). In 2000, the first elections for regional councils were held. (Councilor's terms are for four years.)

To enable the evaluation of citizens' voting behavior at local government elections, we present turnouts and outcomes of elections to national constitutional bodies, too. (Publications of the Czech Office of Statistics are the main source for all such data.)

Members of parliament are elected for a four-year period in accordance with the proportional rule. Since 1996, senators are elected for a six-year term in accordance with a two-round majority rule in single mandate constituencies. For local elections, a mix of proportional and majority rule is used and regional elections are held under proportional representation rules since 2000.

2.1.5.1 *The 1990 Elections*

In 1990, the first free elections after the communist regime took place in the form of both parliamentary elections in June and local elections in November. All of these represented a sort of nationwide referendum, allowing citizens' to offer their assessments of the political changes of 1989.

On 8 and 9 June 1990, elections to the Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and to the Czech and Slovak National Councils were held. Turnout was extremely high—96.8% and the winner was the Civic Forum party (*Občanské Forum*) which got 50% of the overall vote. The next best performer was the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with 13.8% of all votes cast.

On 24 November 1990 elections to communities' (local) self-governments were held in 5 749 communities and 127 town districts. Table 2.7 shows the turnout and outcome of local elections for the Czech Republic as a whole. As independent candidates play a substantial role in local elections, their percentage outcome is given in addition to the most important political parties.

Table 2.7
Turnout and Outcome of 1990 Local Elections in the Czech Republic

	Communities	Town Quarters
Councils elected	5 690	127
Turnout	73.5%	64.6%
Outcome for parties³ in % of mandates gained		
OF	31.7%	43.1%
Independents	27.7%	12.0%
KSČ	14.4%	12.8%
KDU	12.1%	8.3%
MORSL	2.6%	5.5%

SOURCE: Czech Office of Statistics, 1994 [6]

Citizens' agreement with political changes of 1989 expressed in 1990 elections had two aspects: (i) high participation in the elections (although lower in local elections—73.5%, than in nationwide elections—96.8%), and (ii) clear support of the Civic Forum candidates, (i.e., of the party which personalized the political system's changes begun in November 1989). (One of the most striking features of the changed political attitudes in the nation was an aversion to political parties as a whole, which was in accordance with the general spirit of the Civic Forum, an ideologically broad based entity with a rather loose formal structure.

2.1.5.2 The 1992 Elections

The first Federal Parliament and both Czech and Slovak National Councils had only a two-year term. During that period, the Civic Forum split into diverse political subjects and discrepancies between Czech and Slovak political representations rose steadily, ending with a split of Czechoslovakia into two independent states, namely the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, on 1 January, 1993.

On 5 and 6 June 1992, elections to both houses of the Federal Assembly and to both national councils took place. The characteristic aspects were given to that period by the most significant political force, which originated in the Civic Forum, namely the Civic Democratic Party, which received almost 30% of all votes cast. Its efforts were directed to the achievement of standard political structures, i.e. to building up a standard system of political parties and to transfer the political struggle from a rather embarrassing series of spectacles revealing various Civic Forum inter-party and intra-party struggles.

Compared with nationwide elections in 1990, the average turnout lowered from 96.8% in 1990 to 85.1% in 1992. The comparably high turnout (92.2%) was achieved in the smallest villages only (under 500 inhabitants), which is rather astonishing.

2.1.5.3 *The 1994 Elections*

On 18 and 19 November 1994 local elections were held in 6,130 communities (from a total of 6 231) with the participation of 4 849 049 voters, or 62.3% of all who were registered [8]). This represented a strong decline compared with the 1990 local elections turnout (73.5%).

There were 59 754 open offices in local governments and 278 election parties were contesting (over 80% of them were ad hoc election coalitions and blocks). Table 2.8 shows the distribution of mandates with respect to community size and percentage gain of mandates for parliamentary parties and independent candidates.

Table 2.8
Local Elections in 1994 by Community Size

	Communities' Sizes in Number of Inhabitants						Czech Total
	Up to 500	501– 3 000	3 001– 10 000	1 000– 50 000	50 001– 150 000	150 001 or more	
Absolute mandates	26 909	24 030	5 254	2 592	757	212	59 754
Man- dates [%]	45.0	40.2	8.8	4.3	1.3	0.4	100.0
Parties^a	Percentage of mandates gained						
Indepen- dents	76.6	41.3	15.5	11.4	5.7	3.3	53.1
KDUČSL	8.8	18.6	14.9	11.2	5.5	5.2	13.3
ODS	4.0	14.9	29.5	25.9	27.6	33.0	12.0
KSČM	5.6	13.4	18.2	17.3	17.7	15.1	10.5
ČSSD	0.9	2.6	7.0	8.4	13.1	10.8	2.7
SPRRSČ	0.2	0.4	1.1	3.2	5.2	4.2	0.6

SOURCE: Czech Statistical Office, 1995 [9]

Independent candidates, (i.e. candidates who ran as independents or those who ran on lists called “independents” (and not on any list of other parties or coalitions), gained the greatest

number of mandates (53.1%), The second highest number of mandates won was by the Christian and Democratic Union – Czech People Party (KDUČSL) with 13.3%. In third place came the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) at 12.0%, followed by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM: 10.5%). The remaining two parliamentary parties gained a negligible part of mandates, though the Social Democratic Party scored highest in the bigger cities.

2.1.5.4 The 1996 Elections

1996 was the first election year in The Czech Republic after the division of Czechoslovakia. Elections to the Chamber of Deputies were held in May and June 1996, and, for the first time, elections to the Senate took place in November 1996.

Average turnout for the elections to the Chamber of Deputies held on 31 May and 1 June declined to 76.4%: a drop of nearly 9% in comparison with voter turnout in parliamentary elections in 1992 (85.1%).

The first observation that might be derived from these statistics is the significant gains achieved by the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) in comparison with previous years. Second, we can notice differentiations in individual parties' outcomes with regard to community size. Above all, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) gained more votes than its average in bigger communities (i.e., of over 8 000 inhabitants), especially in Prague—its stronghold.

Almost the same trend could be observed for the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), although at a much lower level. However, a reverse trend could be observed for the Christian Democratic Union (KDU–ČSL) and an almost constant voting percentage can be seen for Communist Party (KSČM) with the exception of low support in Prague.

The first elections ever to the Senate took place in November 1996. Citizens' turnout was the lowest of all elections up to that time: only 35.0% of registered voters came to the first round (15 and 16 November 1996) of Senate elections (i.e., less than half of the June turnout that year). Participation at the second round (22 and 23 November 1996) was as low as 30.6%. (A negative media campaign describing the Senate as a totally useless institution, contributed a great deal to such a low turnout.) Mutual relations among parties with respect to votes gained and the dependency of votes gained on the community size were roughly the same as in June elections of that year (held under proportional rule). But non-proportional rules used for Senate elections put communists at a distinct disadvantage with respect to the number of seats won.

2.1.5.5 The 1998 Elections

Towards the end of 1997, the rightist coalition (ODS + KDUČSL + ODA) government had fallen and early parliament elections took place in June 1998. In November that year, regular local elections were held as well as elections for one third of Senate seats.

On 19 and 20 June 1998, early elections to the Chamber of Deputies were held. The average turnout (74.0%) was only a little less than two years ago (76.4%). The Czech Social Democratic Party emerged as the overall winner of the elections, but not decisively (In particular, it failed to gain a majority of available seats.)

A new party emerged on the political scene, the Union of Liberty (US), a splinter group from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). (This split was one of the main causes of the governmental crisis at the end of 1997.)

The percentage of votes for the victorious Social Democratic Party was uniform over community sizes with the only exception being Prague, where it was defeated by ODS. The percentage of votes for ODS and the Union of Liberty (the latter on a much lower level) increased slightly with community size, peaking out in Prague. This was the ODS's trend in previous elections too, especially in 1996. A reverse trend (as in the 1996 elections) can be observed for the Christian Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and the Communist Party (KSČM), the latter with sharper drop in Prague.

Local elections were held in 6,184 communities and 134 town quarters on 13 and 14 November 1998. There were 163 649 candidates contesting 60 986 mandates. In the election struggle, a little over 200 election blocks participated. The number of political parties and pre-election coalitions fell down a little; although, the citizens' participation at the elections was significantly smaller (46.7%) than four years ago (62.3%), representing a decline of almost 16% (Czech Office of Statistics, 1999 [15]).

Table 2.9

Outcome of Local Elections in 1998 by Community Size as a Percentage of Total Mandates

	Community Size in Number of Inhabitants			Total
	Less than 500	501-3 000	3 001 and more	
No. of mandates	26 936	24 175	8 875	59 986
Mandates [%]	44.9	40.3	14.8	100.0
Parties⁵	Percentage of mandates gained			
Independents	81.5	49.4	18.9	59.3
KDUČSL	7.4	16.4	13.0	11.8
KSČM	4.9	12.3	19.5	9.6
ODS	2.3	10.9	22.4	8.7
ČSSD	2.6	7.4	17.0	6.6
US	0.3	0.7	4.7	1.1

SOURCE: Czech Office of Statistics, 1999 [15] (percent of mandates: tab. 16g, 17g, 18g, 19g)

As to the number of candidates, as well as to the number of mandates gained, the most successful were the independent candidates. They represented 52.6% nominees on the lists, and gained 59.3% of all mandates. As to parties represented in parliament, we observe similar trends with respect to community size as in outcome of parliament elections. We can say that Christian Democratic Union (KDUČSL) and Communist Party (KSČM) are “smaller communities” parties and Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Social Democrats (ČSSD), and Union of Liberty (US) are “bigger communities” parties.

The first round of elections to the Senate was held on the same days as local elections (13 and 14 November 1998). That explains the relatively high turnout (42.4% – almost the same as in local elections: 46.7%) in comparison with the turnout of Senate elections two years earlier (35.0%). Certainly, the 20.3% turnout at the second round (almost 15 percentage points lower) proved the lowering citizens’ interest in elections at all, and especially in Senate (1996 second round turnout was 30.6%).

In comparison with the 1996 elections, no independent candidates gained any seats. A notable success was achieved by the so-called “Foursome Coalition” (4K), consisting of Christian Democrats, the Union of Liberty, the Civic Democratic Union, and the Democratic Union. Surprisingly, Social Democrats were not as successful as in Chamber-of-Deputies elections in June that year.

2.1.5.6 The 2000 Elections

The first elections ever to newly established regional councils were held on 12th November 2000. On the same date, elections to one third of all Senate seats took place, too.

Regional elections took place in 13 regions of the 14 regions (in Prague, which is both a region and a community, the Community Council became the Regional Council and further elections to it will still be held in the term of elections to other community councils). Over 40 parties, political movements, coalitions and independent associations ran for offices, of which 10 were successful in gaining any council seats in regional self-governments. 675 councilors were elected in all, of which parliamentary parties gained 628 seats, thus only 47 remained for representatives of other groupings, mainly of independent candidates joined in various coalitions.

In Table 10, the outcome of the elections is shown for all 13 regions. Both the regional and the overall outcome of four parliamentary parties is given, as well as outcome of six associations of independent candidates which succeeded in gaining mandates, is entered under the heading “other”.

Only 33.6% of registered voters cast ballots. This represents the lowest participation since 1989 in elections of any kind held in the Czech Republic under a proportional representation system. (Elections to the Senate have elicited even lower voter turnouts, but senatorial elections are held in separate constituencies under the principle of majority rule).

Table 2.10
Turnout and Outcome of Regional Elections (2000)

Region	Turnout	Percentage of mandates gained by parties ⁶				
		ODS	4K	KSČM	ČSSD	Other
Central Bohemia	32.8	32.3	24.6	24.6	18.5	
Budějovice	34.1	29.1	23.6	21.8	14.5	10.9
Plzeň	35.6	28.9	17.8	24.4	17.8	11.1
Karlovy Vary	28.4	33.3	22.2	26.7	17.8	
Ústí nad Labem	29.7	30.9	16.4	32.7	20.0	
Liberec	33.1	28.9	17.8	20.0	15.6	17.8
Hradec Králové	34.7	31.1	31.1	22.2	15.6	
Pardubice	36.5	26.7	33.3	20.0	15.6	4.4
Jihlava	35.9	22.2	28.9	22.2	13.3	13.3
Brno	34.9	20.0	35.4	23.1	13.8	7.7
Olomouc	34.2	21.8	27.3	23.6	18.2	9.1
Zlín	36.1	20.0	33.3	17.8	15.6	13.3
Ostrava	32.2	30.8	18.5	27.7	16.9	6.2
Total for Czech Republic	33.6	27.4	25.3	23.9	16.4	7.0

SOURCE: Czech Statistical Office, 2000 [18]

Nonetheless, full councils were elected in all 13 regions. Comparison with results of previous elections, both to the Parliament and to community councils, shows that people who took part in regional elections were in fact usually very actively involved in particular political parties, plus the voters influenced by local independent candidates. The most committed activists belong to the Civic Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union, and of course to communists. Social democrats did not succeed in creating a firm and widespread electorate. In this sense, the elections to regional councils didn't introduce anything new.

The first round of elections to the Senate took place on the same day as regional elections, viz. on 12 November 2000. That is why the turnout at Senate elections (33.7%) was practically identical to the turnout in regional elections (33.6%). The gap between turnouts at first and second rounds was 12%, not as deep as at 1998 Senate elections (15%). That difference can only be

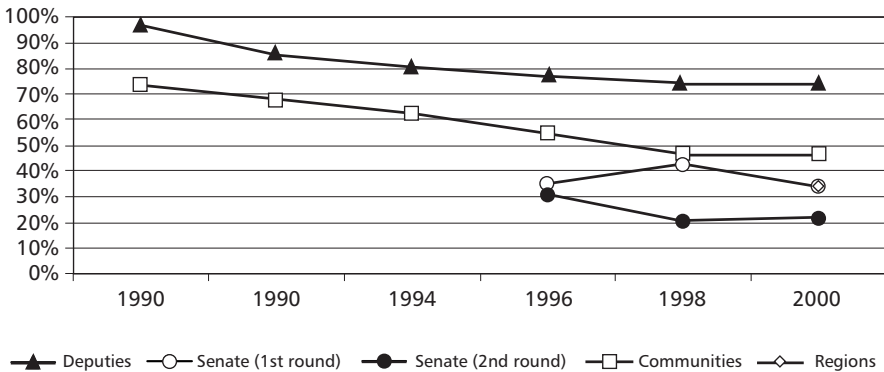
explained by the fact that 1998 Senate elections were held on the same date as more popular local elections to community councils.

The percentage of votes gained by particular parties shows a growing popularity of the Foursome Coalition (or lowering confidence in other parties) stressed by spectacular number of senators elected. The Civic Democratic Party gained its expected share of votes and seats, but Communists and Social Democrats, in spite of their sizeable share of votes, suffered a crushing defeat.

2.1.5.7 Comparison of Local and National Elections

In this section we compare citizens' approach to local elections (to community and region councils) with their approach to nationwide elections (to the Chamber of Deputies and to the Senate). Two aspects of that citizens' approach are used, namely election turnouts (Figure 2.11) and election outcomes (Table 2.11), as they were discussed in previous sections.

Figure 2.11
Comparison of Local and Parliament Elections Turnout



NOTE: The point depicting 2000 regional turnout merges with that of the 2000 Senate first-round turnout.

NOTE: Figure 11 above illustrates the voter turnout in various elections in particular election years. For that purpose, missing statistics for the 1994 Chamber of Deputies elections and for the 1992 and 1996 community elections were replaced by means of extrapolating adjacent values. Missing statistics for these two elections in 2000 were replaced by their respective 1998 values.

Even a passing glance at Figure 2.11 above points to several tendencies, which can be derived from the data:

- Citizens' participation in every type of elections has continued to decline since 1990;
- The 1998 Senate elections (first round) were the only exception, when the higher turnout was caused by the fact that in that year elections to community councils were held on the same date.
- The overall decline was pretty similar, raging from about one fourth for the Chamber of Deputies and second-round Senate elections to over one third for community councils' elections.
- The difference in turnout between elections to the Chamber of Deputies and to community councils is almost the same as the difference in turnout between elections to community councils and to second-round Senate elections (about 27%).
- The decline in turnouts of community councils' elections accelerates a little in time (between 11.2% and 15.6% between elections).

The comparison of outcomes of nationwide and local elections is a little more difficult, as we employ different measuring criteria for them. This chiefly comes in the form of percentages of votes for parties in nationwide elections and percentages of mandates gained in local elections. Nonetheless, several basic conclusions can be made.

First, we present outcomes of elections to the Chamber of Deputies (proportional election rule). In the following Table 2.11, data for the years 1990 and 1992 are for Federal Assembly elections and Czech National Council elections, respectively.

Table 2.11
Outcomes of Elections to the Chamber of Deputies, 1990–1998

Parties ⁷		Percentage of Votes Gained			
		1990	1992	1996	1998
OF	OF	50.0	Ceased to exist		
	ODS		29.7	29.6	27.7
	US				8.6
	ODA		5.9	6.4	no seats
KDUČSL		8.8	6.3	8.1	9.0
KSČM		13.8	14.0	10.3	11.0
ČSSD		no seats	6.5	26.4	32.3

SOURCE: Czech Statistical Office, 1990–1998, [5]–[14]

We can see a heavy poll increase for Social Democrats in the last two elections, but almost a steady level of support for Christian Democrats and Communists. The latter two parties have higher support in smaller communities, whereas the other parties received more votes in towns (see previous sections).

The picture given by outcomes of Senate elections is a little bit different, as shown in the following Table 2.12 (data for the first round of the elections are used, as they correspond better to overall voters' attitudes in elections held under the majority rule). Only parties that gained parliamentary seats are listed.

Table 2.12
Outcomes of First-round Elections to the Senate, 1996–2000

Parties ⁷			Percentage of Votes Gained (1st Round)		
			1996	1998	2000
ODS	ODS		36.5	27.7	23.6
	US	4K ⁸		26.6	27.5
ODA					
DEU ⁸					
KDUČSL					
KSČM			14.3	16.5	17.8
ČSSD			20.3	21.7	17.7
Independents			4.3	4.0	1.2

SOURCE: Czech Statistical Office, 1997–2001, [12]–[19]

In comparison with elections to the Chamber of Deputies, the outcomes of the newly formed Foursome Coalition are sizeable in the last two elections. On the other side, a sign of the falling overall popularity of the Social Democrats has been visible since the last election.

In Table 2.13, outcomes in percent of mandates gained for local elections are given (parliament parties only are listed). The first three columns of the table show outcomes of elections to community councils. Entries in the last column represent the outcomes of elections to regional councils.

Table 2.13
Outcomes of Local Elections to Communities (1990, 1998)
and Regions (2000)

Parties ⁷				Percentage of Mandates Gained			
				1990	1994	1998	2000
OF	OF			31.7	Ceased to exist		
	ODS	ODS			12.0	8.7	27.4
		US				1.1	
	ODA		4K ⁸		1.0	0.3	25.3
KDU–ČSL		12.1		13.3	11.8		
KSČM				14.4	10.5	9.6	23.9
ČSSD				1.6	2.7	6.6	16.4
Independents				27.7	53.1	59.3	7.0

SOURCE: Czech Statistical Office, 1994–2000, [6]–[18]

Clearly, independent candidates gained majority of mandates in community councils (their smaller outcome in 1990 can be explained by the fact, that the Civic Forum—OF—had not a character of a political party). In comparison with nationwide elections, Christian Democrats and Communists achieved better results (as we know, their supporters come from smaller communities, the councils of which represent a higher percentage of all mandates). On the contrary, the outcomes of 2000 regional elections indicate a clear correlation between regional and nationwide elections: namely, the smallest percentage of successful independent candidates and results of parliament parties, comparable to that of nationwide elections.

The results of local and nationwide elections indicate important trends in development of citizens' relations with local self-governments.

- From the falling participation in local elections we can obviously detect falling citizens' interest in local governments. In the 1990–1998 period, the ratio of active participants in local elections fell almost 30 percent.
- Of course, this trend correlates with the general decline of interest level in politics, including drops in participation in other types of elections. In comparison with elections to the Senate and the 2000 regional elections, the turnout of community elections is still higher. On the contrary, it is much lower than the turnout of elections to the Chamber of Deputies and its fall is far sharper (from the 1994 to the 1998 local elections, it represents more than a 15-point decline).

- Smaller turnout of community elections (than that of Chamber of Deputies elections) can be seen as a contradiction to higher citizens' trust in community councils than their trust in Chamber of Deputies (section 2.1.1). This problem deserves further study.
- In smaller communities, the ratio of independent councilors is growing. It seems that the party principle of casting the local governments did not strike root at all in communities of less than 500 inhabitants, and in communities with populations under 3 000 it actually lost ground.
- On the contrary, the weight of political parties in local elections grows in greater communities, namely in the biggest towns where local election outcomes tend to mirror those of national elections. The increase in voting preferences of political parties in big towns is above all connected with an increase of preferences to the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and to the presently governing Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD).

2.1.6 Mayoral Changes

The changes at the post of the mayor cannot be traced using available statistical data. As a mayor is elected by the vote of councilors, a special survey should be undertaken to get a better picture of the problem. We can only quote results of *Institute of Sociology Research* from 1997 [21], where mayors were asked whether they were councilors or mayors before becoming mayor: 76.1% who were mayors in 1997 were mayors or councilors before the 1994 elections. It is worth noting that there is now a certain stability in the numbers of mayors being re-elected, as less than a quarter of those winning in the most recent elections had never previously served on local councils.

2.1.7 How is Self-government Portrayed in the Media?

There are no summary data currently available which can be used to assess how the media report about local governments, whether media were generally helpful or not in support of the democratic development of self-governing institutions in the Czech Republic. Nonetheless, we feel the following to be generally true:

- Everyday mass media (daily press, TV and radio broadcasting) give significantly less attention to problems of self-government and life in communities than to more broadly national events. However, the same media overwhelmingly pay less attention than the community self-government problems warrant. This applies primarily to national media, but applies to a lesser degree to regional and local media, too.
- This lack of media concern towards local policies is connected with a lack of concern expressed by central decision-making organs (above all, the government and both houses of parliament) in topical and conceptual problems of development of local government

and policies. It can best be seen at continuing lack of support to regional reform, not only by private media, but by publicly-controlled media, too. One of the important reasons why media are so little concerned with local government problems is their orientation to faultfinding and to a destructive approach to the world in general.

- On the other hand there are a number of more specialized media sources. The independent monthly *Parliament Bulletin* [16] represents a very serious source of knowledge and information, even for local policies. Of course, magazines directly specializing in local government problems focus their attention mainly on the presentation and explanation of legislation⁹, and also on a sort of exchange of experience among council members. But what we don't find in them is signs of systematic care of local self-government and administrative reform.

This short and general outline is undoubtedly inaccurate in some cases. But we hope it comes fairly near to reality in principle, especially in showing that the media still do not act to support public influence upon local self-government development and reform. This is demonstrated by a general lack of interest in those problems. It is also evident in an overemphasis of focus on orientation to negative experience and events, and by kowtowing to ideological approaches, thus turning attention away from fairly and objectively presented problems of interest to communities and their citizens. The notable exceptions are Radio Free Europe and a few magazines oriented to political science and other social sciences (partly this holds for ČT2 – the second channel of public TV, too). But this kind of media is still clearly in the minority.

2.2 Influence of Public Opinion Upon Local Self-government Reform

In recent years, three problem areas can be viewed as the main issues of local self-government reform in the Czech Republic:

- the preparation and step-by-step installation of regions as higher territorial self-government units;
- the possibility of direct election of mayors by citizens;
- the development of legislation with respect to communities' self-government capacities.

The first area, viz. the preparation and installation of regions, has a decisive place in the process. As to local legislation development, we also mention the problem in section 2.1 of this report.

2.2.1 Regional Reform and Public Opinion

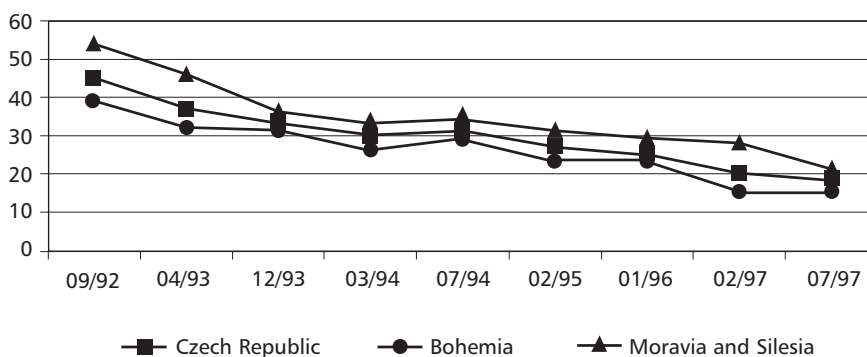
Newly introduced regions represent a new link between self-government in communities and the central government at the national level. Besides the creation of new self-government organs,

the creation of the regional system has led to two interesting developments: the role of the national government as administrator is relegated to a lower level. And by 2003, district authorities will no longer serve as state administration organs.

That reform is rooted in the 1993 Constitution. Preparation of the reform lasted seven years and is very much ongoing. Since 1992, public opinion on the pace of reform was under survey (*IVVM 4 JUL 1997*, [2]). Respondents were asked whether they consider the problem of higher self-government units as very urgent, urgent, a little urgent, or as no problem at all. Diagram 12 shows the percentages of those who consider it as a very urgent or urgent problem among the Czech population as a whole, and in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, respectively.

Figure 2.12

Development of the Sense of Urgency to Establish Regional Self-government



As Figure 2.12 shows, public sensing of regional reform urgency steadily fell in 1992 to 1997. The decline reached 23% during that period in the Czech Republic as a whole. In Moravia and Silesia, it amounted to an astonishing 31 points, and was even worse in Bohemia.

Looking at the data, an obvious question arises; why was regional reform not started more earnestly during the time of its greatest popular support? The Act constituting regions (Regional Act, March 2000) was not passed until the Social Democrats took over the government after 1998 elections. The previous governments, headed in parliament by the Civic Democratic Party, were hostile to the idea.

In 1997, about 74% of respondents said that regional self-government and public administration would draw the decision-making nearer to citizens, thus the principle of subsidiarity would

come to its fulfillment. But only 33% of respondents thought that reform would contribute to the improvement of state administration performance. Almost 70% of respondents felt that reform would be a waste of public finances. Forty-five percent stated that reform is useless, and a further 22% were undecided. Only 12% of people in the Czech Republic thought in 1997 that regional reform would bring any benefits. (In fact, 26% considered it as bringing only disadvantages. The remaining 60% of respondents were divided evenly between those who consider it to bring both benefits and disadvantages, and those who didn't know.

- Among benefits, the respondents mentioned:
 - economic development of the region (12%);
 - more flexible control of the region (10%);
 - positive decentralization of power (9%).
- As disadvantages, the following were mentioned:
 - growth of numbers of offices and officials (34%);
 - costs of implementing the reform (23%);
 - social confusion and disorder (7%).

In 2000, the regions were officially established. In November of that year, elections to 13 of 14 regional councils took place. (In Prague, which is both a community and a region, the community council became the regional council.)

Public opinion surveys (*IVVM 20 MAY* and *24 OCT 2000*) show that public attitudes regarding new regions have changed very little since reforms were put in place. Table 2.14 shows reactions to the question as to whether the overall situation viz. regional reform will improve:

Table 2.14
Expected Improvement Due to New Regional Governments (Year 2000)

Situation in Respondent's Region	May	September	October
Will improve	27%	38%	25%
Will not improve	37%	36%	40%
Do not know	36%	26%	35%

SOURCE: Institute for Research of Public Meaning, 2000 [2]

We can see that, in comparison with previous years, the only significant change is in the percentage of undecided respondents. Otherwise, pessimists represented a strong majority. The reasons for respondents' opinions on improvement of the situation in their regions were as follows:

- Among those who consider the situation as having improved:
- 72% mentioned that decision-making will be brought “nearer to people”.
- 16% stated improved management in their region.
- 6% hoped that reforms would help “centralized hegemony” come to an end.
- Among those who think the situation will not improve:
- 30% were convinced that administrative machinery will grow.
- 21% considered regional reorganization a waste of money.
- 18% did not expect any changes as “people will be always the same”.
- 12% were “awaiting chaos”.

Public opinion surveys (*IVVM 20 MAY 2000*) also show that the public was not sufficiently informed of upcoming elections to regional councils even six months before balloting took place. Though 50% of respondents said they are satisfied with the division of the Czech Republic into new regions, 14% of them were not able to answer the question. An astonishing 23% had no idea how the regions were actually divided.

The situation was even worse with respect to information of public about new regions duties: only 5% said they are informed, but 83% declared they are not informed. This situation had not changed by October, one month before elections, so people were called to give their votes for something they didn't fully understand. (It should be said that many candidates didn't know, either.)

This small level of information was mirrored in the citizens' willingness to take part in autumn 2000 elections to regional councils, as can be seen on the following Figure 2.13 showing surveys' results (the round-up to 100% includes “don't know” answers):

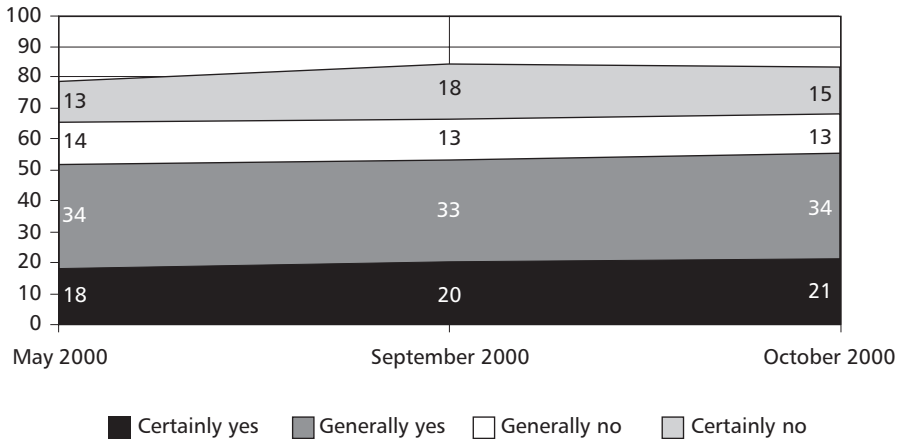
The actual participation in the first elections to regional councils (33.6%) proved the low level of interest in that area of local government reform, (6.44%). (see section 2.1.5.6.). The results of elections to regional councils show that the influence of public opinion on it, if any, was more negative than positive. The process of creating public opinion on that reform reflected the lack of willingness towards the reform on the part of the rightist government of 1993 to 1996.

Assessing the influence of public attitudes about the reform of regional self-government in the Czech Republic, maybe the most useful generalization could be:

- Politicians failed to persuade the majority of Czech citizens of the reform process's urgency and importance.
- The above point strengthens the prevailing attitude that public participation in the political process including voting is futile. On the contrary, that reform should be boycotted as a useless undertaking.

- Summing up, the public meaning acted (if in any manner whatever) rather like a brake on the preparation, development and introduction of the reform.

Figure 2.13
Changes in Willingness to Participate in Regional Elections During 2000



2.2.2 Public Opinion on the Mayoral Election Process

In the IVVM survey (5 JUN 2000, [2]), respondents were asked whether they “*think that the mayor should be elected by councilors’ votes, or directly by citizens’ votes*”. Most respondents chose direct election of mayors (70%), while the status quo, (i.e., mayors being appointed by their councilors), garnered only 20% support. (The remaining 10% did not express an opinion).

Analysis of influence of socio-demographic factors and other classifying characteristics showed significantly higher support for direct mayoral election prevails among the Czech population at large, with only small differentiations.

- A relatively higher support for the current election process was observed among people 30 to 59 years of age (25% support); among people with higher education levels (30%); among entrepreneurs (35%); among higher-income individuals, and among those who trust their local self-government (26% in both cases). Similar results were noted in residents of bigger cities, as they gave their support to direct mayoral elections relatively less frequently.
- On the contrary, the relatively higher inclination to the direct mayor’s election (or less frequent support of the mayor’s election by the council) was observed among people under

30 years of age, among people with more elementary education, among students, among respondents from communities with populations of between 500 and 2,000 inhabitants, among respondents with lower living standards, among Communists, and among those who generally don't trust their local governments.

A 1997 survey of mayors [21] showed that among six key areas, which characterize the decisive conditions of local self-government performance in particular community, the problem of direct mayor's election is considered significant. In all, almost 60% of mayors polled agreed with the statement: "*The mayor should be elected directly by the citizens of the community, rather than by councilors as at present*". (42.0% agreed entirely and 15.8% partially agreed.)

About the same importance was given by the mayors under survey to further statements, namely:

- "Democratic self-government would perform in the town equally well, even without political parties" (31.8% agreed entirely and 25.8% partially agreed).
- "Towns should have greater freedom in deciding about the scope of services provided, even if this brought an increase in disparity among towns" (35.6% agreed entirely; 36.2% partially agreed).
- Of course, the highest agreement arises from the statement "*Active citizens participation during the election term is important for local democracy performance in the town (community)*"; over 70% of mayors expressed their agreement with this statement (40.8% agreed entirely and 31.2% partially agreed).

It can be seen that the majority opinion of mayors is in fact in accord with the expressed opinion of most citizens in one big respect; for their management of the community, it would be better if they were elected directly by citizens, thus being less bound in their decisions by the council board, the councilors, or even their political parties. Thus, voters and mayors alike consider this problem of direct mayoral elections very important. The fact that no politicians are seriously concerned with the idea—and that public opinion in this respect is in effect neglected or even disregarded—can be one of the sources of the public's tendency towards pessimism and fatalism towards almost all activities regarding local self-government reform.

2.2.3 Legislation Development with Respect to Community Self-government

Citizens' opinions as to whether the local government duties serve the correct purpose were expressed in the IVVM survey (5 June, 2000, [2]) where the respondents answered the question "*Do you consider the duties of community councils to be sufficient, or not?*". The choices available included "certainly sufficient", "generally sufficient", "generally insufficient", "certainly insufficient", or "don't know").

Among the general Czech public, the opinion prevails that current competencies are sufficient. In all, 49% of respondents stated that the duties are sufficient (8% “certainly” and 41% “generally”). Only 11% considered them insufficient (9% “generally” and 2% “certainly”). The very high remainder of them, 40%, has no opinion at all.

Public opinion on that matter is not significantly different from socio-demographic characteristics and other major classifying factors:

- Generally more positive attitudes towards the sufficiency of local government duties can be observed among people 45 to 59 years of age, among people with completed secondary level or higher education, among entrepreneurs, among those with higher living standards, among respondents from communities of under 500 inhabitants, among residents of northern Moravia, and among supporters of the Civic Democratic Party.
- On the contrary, the least favorable opinions were expressed by people with lower education levels, by less skilled workers, by people with lower living standards, by inhabitants of bigger cities (over 100 000) including Prague, and by supporters of the communists (KSCM—Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia).
- A higher percentage of indecisiveness was observed among people up to 19 years of age, among women, and among students. In these groups, both the aforementioned opinions were less frequent, too.

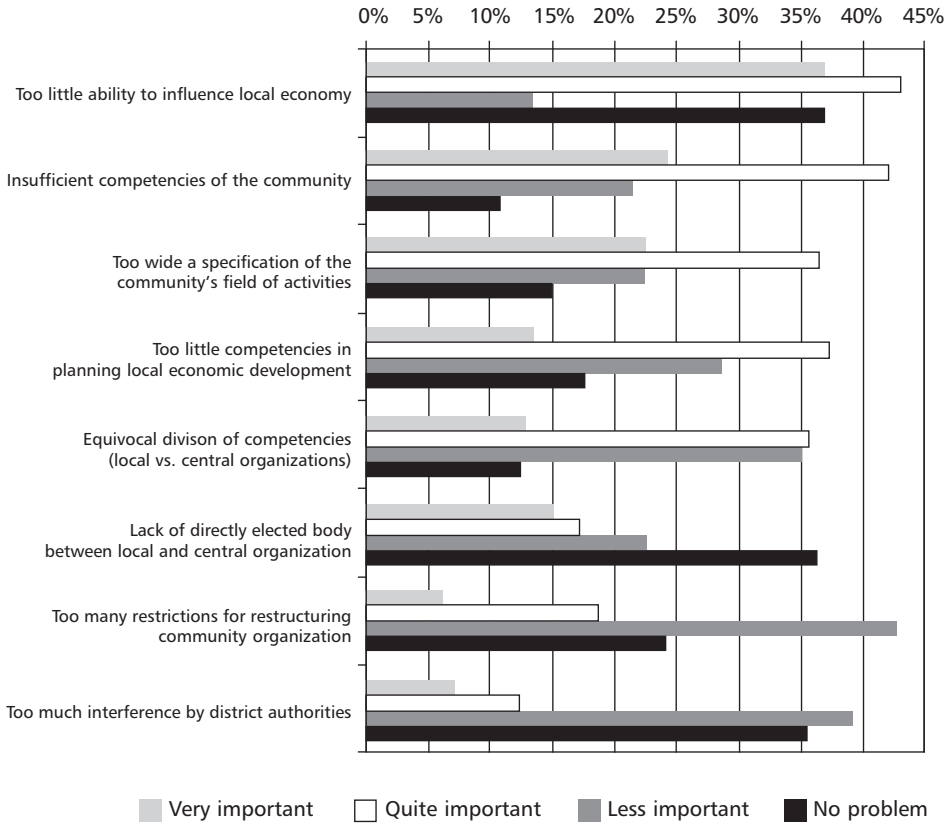
As to the mayors’ views on the sufficiency or insufficiency of local government duties, we have more structured data (the *1997 Survey Among Mayors*, [21]). Mayors were asked to assess several areas and problems, and to state whether they represent a very important problem in their community, a generally important problem, a less important problem, or no problem at all (other possible answers included “not applicable”, and “don’t know”).

Figure 2.14 shows eight areas connected with self-government duties in the order of importance as a problem in the eyes of the mayors. (“Not applicable” and “don’t know” answers are not included.)

As we can see, the mayors consider the insufficient competencies in the present local government structure to be the second most pressing problem (24.2% “very important” and 42.0% “generally important”), just after complaints about “*too little space for influencing local incomes*” (36.9% “very important” and 43.1% “generally important”). The three further areas, “*Too wide a specification of the community’s field of activities*” (22.4% + 36.5%), “*Too little duties in planning local economic development*” (13.5% + 37.3%), and “*Equivocal division of competencies (local vs. central organs)*” (12.8% + 35.7%), with importance rankings around or above 50%; all constitute parts of community duties. We can say that duties of local self-governments represent more important problems for mayors than for the general public, and that the mayors don’t consider them as comprehensive as they want them to be.

Figure 2.14

Importance of Problems in Local Competencies in View of the Mayors



3. PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT —THE LOCAL LEVEL VIEW

To gain more specific information about individual cases, we took advantage of a working meeting of mayors held in Brno in mid October [22]. On that occasion, we conducted a short survey among 270 currently-serving mayors.

To give a picture of the mutual communication between local governments on one side and the public on the other, it is helpful to remind oneself about local self-government duties with

respect to informing citizens in accordance with the law. Besides the obligation to provide citizens with various information, the organs of community self-government are legally obliged to create conditions enabling citizens to express their opinions on community matters. Among the legal duties related to the communication with the citizens, the most important ones are:

- *Official bulletin boards*
Used for official publication of community council and authority documents and rulings. These must be printed so that any citizen can give his/her opinion on them. This procedure must also always be applied to the minutes of council meetings, to the council or authority rulings, to public notices and decrees, as well as to notices of tenders, of privatization dealings, etc.
- *Public access*
Precise visiting hours should be declared, and presence of officials and councilors should be ascertained. Of course, there are differences among communities in that respect. Often, services provided are based on the needs of the relevant authority, rather than on the needs of the citizens.
- *Open council meetings*
Meetings are open to the public by law. Citizens' participation is governed by the council's rules of procedure. These rules should allow the citizens to enter into some parts of the proceeding, (e.g. during debates on community budgets).
- *Dealing with complaints and interpellations*
Legal terms and procedural rules are defined.
- *Petitionary right and citizens' initiatives*
The right to petition is guaranteed by the Constitution. Any citizens' action groups may be invited to take part at official proceedings, (e.g. building proceeding, environmental impact assessment, area planning proceedings, etc.).
- *Local referenda*
are a constitutional right. Their use is obligatory when a part of the community wants to get independence. It can be used in deciding other matters, too.

In 1999, the Free Access to Information Act became effective. As it is a new law, community authorities are only gradually becoming used to it. The Act defines precisely the procedures, which even the local authority should adhere to when it gives information required by citizens. The Act states the two-week maximum period required responding to a citizen's written requirement. It also determines the rules under which relevant information should be delivered (e.g., the price of compiling the information needed). In the meantime, we are checking up the readiness of community authorities to apply the Act in practice. Till now, the results of our probe seem to indicate that small communities do not know much about the Act.

In the introduction to the first part of this report, we discussed various everyday problems being encountered by Czech citizens. Here we can show the state and development of problems in the

life of a particular community. It was the object of a representative sociological research [23] realized in the northern Bohemian town of Liberec, which has about 100 000 inhabitants.

Citizens were asked to select five out of 14 items, which they regard as “should be priorities” for their councilors. The relative frequency of the item’s occurrence in all responses is given in Table 2.15. The first seven items are shown in order of decreasing frequency.

Table 2.15
Importance of Social Problems in Liberec

1.	Environment	25.7%
2.	Availability of housing	23.5%
3.	Crime, public safety	22.2%
4.	Health services	8.1%
5.	Housing in terms of maintenance of the housing stock	6.9%
6.	Public transport	4.1%
7.	Social services	2.8%

SOURCE: Liberec Survey [23]

Also very relevant was the opinion about policy outcomes of the city hall during the last four years. Citizens were asked about their evaluation of the town’s development in six areas. Three of them were seen as having worsened, the other three showed improvement in the eyes of respondents.

- As the worst area, “*availability of housing*” was evaluated. Only 5% of respondents saw improvements, in contrast to 86% who saw it as worsening;
- The other two areas overwhelmingly regarded as being worse than four years ago were “*public safety*” (only 7% improved against 76% worsened) and “*public transport*” (13% improved against 41% worsened);
- “*Town center appearance*” was by far the area seen as most improved (93% improved against only 3% worsened), thus showing a shift of 90% towards improvement in the minds of citizens,
- The other two areas, where improvement outweighed worsening in citizens’ evaluation, were “*environment*” (43% improved against 21% worsened) and “*services*” (56% improved against 27% worsened).

3.1 Local Government Interest in Finding Out About Local Public Preferences

One of the main reasons why we conducted the “*Mayor 2000*” survey [22] was to collect a sample of data about various councils’ reflection of public interaction in the Czech Republic. Such data is not available in any well-arranged or comprehensive form. As an additional knowledge we introduce here few results from *1996 research by the Faculty of Social Sciences* [3].

3.1.1 Mayors’ Views on Communications with the Public

The meeting “*Mayor 2000*” [22] was attended by 270 mayors and councilors, 118 of them answered questions on our survey. Mayors from communities with populations under 2 000 represented most of the meeting attendees (over 60%). On the contrary, towns of over 50 000 inhabitants were not represented at all (only a few mayors of town quarters of Brno—pop. 400 000—were the exception). Even though the survey was in no way representative, we can consider it as an important probe into the theme.

Above all, the probe showed that almost 80% of mayors state that in their communities, citizen involvement is influencing how council and community authority work: (i.e., public influence is reflected by local legislation. 17% of them stated as well that this influence is very frequent and important). Almost 62% of them consider such influence as occasional, but notable. Only 4% of respondents mentioned no influence of public involvement on development and changes of legislation in their community.

Those who answered that question positively (existing influence of public meaning on local legislation) were asked an additional question: namely, to identify the forms and ways (from a prescribed list) used in their community to project public input into local legislation. The answers show that these feedback-providing forms are usually practiced in combination, as the mayors often received two or three forms per respondent on average:

- The form used most frequently is connected with dealing and assessment of citizens’ complaints. This occurs in more than 50% of all communities;
- A little less used is the form of bulletins or magazines issued by the town hall. In about 31% of communities, local independent media are used for this purpose;
- At roughly the same level of importance, we find recurrent meetings of mayors and councilors with citizens;
- Self-produced surveys of public meaning are used in 15% of communities for that purpose,
- As another form used for that purposed, about 5% of mayors mentioned the Internet.

The mayors were also asked in general whether there are methods they regularly use to find out about citizens' opinions on community and council matters during the electoral term (excluding election campaign materials). According to responses, only 1% of communities use any means for that purpose in a systematic way. Over 11% of mayors mentioned that a combination of several means is used in their community, but not systematically. Over one third stated that they have at least one such means. Of course, over 56% of mayors polled admitted either they have no means for that purpose at all, or they are not certain if they have any.

When the mayors were eventually asked what means they had in mind answering the previous question, 42 mayors mentioned 80 different activities:

- As a most frequent means of communication of town hall with the citizens, meetings with citizens at diverse occasions were mentioned (at local pub, at common activities of interest, at football matches, etc.). This was mentioned by almost 14% of all mayors inquired (and by 20% of those who answered this question);
- The following group of most frequently used means for finding out public attitudes in communities was represented by town hall bulletins, discussions and interpellations at open council meetings, and work with citizens in council commissions and during their visits to local authorities. Each of those means is used in about 7% to 8% of communities. One interesting form was introduced, namely insertion of leaflets in town-hall bulletins to be returned with citizens' opinions and suggestions;
- Among further means, the most frequently used are meetings with citizens organized by the town hall (public and friendly meetings, meetings with the mayor) and the box for citizens' suggestions, which is located in town hall or at different places of the community. Both of these forms are used in about 5% to 6% of communities;
- Other means of finding out about public meaning are used rather sporadically. They are represented by cooperation with interest activities groups and associations, with churches, as well as with the types of professionals who naturally influence local public life, such as physicians, teachers, etc.

The analysis didn't prove any statistically significant differentiation in forms used with regard to the size of the community. Only direct contacts with the citizens and the cooperation in common activities can be said to be more significant for smaller communities than for bigger ones. Of course, small differences with respect to community size can be implied by a too small ratio of mayors of bigger communities among the mayors inquired.

From the results of the probe among 118 mayors we can draw the following conclusions, which can be considered to a certain extent valid in general:

- In the majority of communities, it is possible to observe public meaning influence on the state and development of local legislation. Only in less than one fifth of communities is such that influence observed scarcely or not at all.

- Among the concrete means or forms of realization of that influence, the spontaneous citizens' impulses play obviously lesser role than the initiatives of the town hall itself:
- Though the most widespread means of that type of influence are the citizens' complaints, on the same level of importance there are town-hall bulletins and the use of local media.
- This contrast is seen even more markedly on the concrete ways in which the public meaning is applied in the council activities. The town-hall initiative is more frequent, inviting the citizens to express their opinions. Far less frequent are the direct activities and initiatives of citizens toward the town hall and the councilors, or citizens' voluntary participation in town-hall activities in commissions, etc.
- Even though the surveyed mayors stated that the public meaning influence on the community matters is high in general, in fact—when we focus on the level of systematic approach and seriousness given to these problems—the methods used are often rather formal: their main features being mutual defensive reactions, and little mutual overtness.

3.1.2 Additional Information on Citizens' Interest in Public Affairs

The findings from the probe among the mayors can be supplemented with the results of the *1996 research by the Faculty of Social Sciences* [3], which was of little interest among citizens in public affairs. Clear interest in public affairs was declared by 34% of respondents, and clear disinterest by 37%. The remaining one third allows for some activities of that kind, but it is not looking for them.

Greater interest in influencing public affairs was manifested above all by men, by people between 30 to 59 years of age, and by inhabitants of smaller communities. Among more educated people, about one half said they were interested in public affairs, but among people with only high-school education, this interest fell to 36% (i.e., close to sample interest average). Higher interest in influencing public affairs was also shown by people who experience the most important changes since 1989, whether an improvement or a worsening of their social status. (The same is true for people declaring themselves supporters of the political extreme left.)

Respondents were also asked for the reasons discouraging them from participation in influencing public affairs.

- The reasons stated were mainly of a personal nature: lack of time was mentioned by 34% of respondents. Age and health problems represented an obstacle for 14% of them.
- Shortcomings, failures, and the imperfection of public administration represent an obstacle for one third of respondents: 17% of them consider such as defects of democracy; 10% mention disinterest and corruption of authorities, and 5% are discouraged with getting false information.
- Because of ideological reasons, 7% of respondent don't like to participate on public affairs.

3.2 Techniques Used by Local Governments to Find Out About Local Public Preferences

In a 1997 study among mayors [21], (519 mayors, a representative sample for towns and communities over 2000 inhabitants) it was found that the most urgent task mayors should focus on is “*being informed about citizens’ opinions*” (among 15 items rated on a five-degree scale, that one was assigned “most important” mark by 67% of mayors). Second place was held by the task “*to formulate precise and unambiguous goals for [community] authority*” (by 63% of mayors).

At the same time, over 10% of mayors entirely agreed with the statement “*local policy is often so complicated that local inhabitants cannot really understand what it is about*”, and even 17% of them entirely agreed with the statement “*elections are the only way by which local inhabitants can influence local policy*”. Conversely, over 40% of mayors in this survey entirely agreed with a statement “*Active participation of inhabitants between elections is important for the functioning of local democracy in [my] town (community)*”.

The quotations mentioned above (and we could give further ones) indicate the complexity and ambiguity in real communication of self-government bodies toward citizens and in real participation of citizens on that self-government. Evidence of such a complexity of these problems is given by other sources, too. Therefore, it is very important to understand various techniques used to find out about local public preferences.

3.2.1 The Most Significant Techniques

The most significant techniques with which local policy preferences are found out are elections to local councils and local referenda. The Institute of Local Referenda has its basis in the currently effective law of the Czech Republic. During all the time of its existence, that legal norm was used mainly, and almost exclusively, for one reason only: to gain independence for a part of a community, (i.e. to create a new community by detachment from an existing one). From 1992 to 2000, a few hundred referenda of that type took place as a few hundred new communities were created.¹⁰

Only 9% of mayors surveyed in the 1997 research [21] entirely agreed with the statement “*important community issues should be decided by referendum*”. This also indicates low regard for the importance and/or appropriateness of using referenda as a tool of local policy.

We know about only one local referendum of that type (i.e. not for creating a new community), namely the referendum held in November 2000 in the southern Bohemian town of Tábor, which has around 40 000 inhabitants. Citizens were asked two questions dealing with the town development program. The questions were about excluding construction of two new highways

from the overall development plan. (The highways were planned to run through the town center). The referendum resulted in a rejection of planned highways (over 76% of valid ballots).

3.2.2 An Attempt to Classify Other Techniques

It must be admitted that local elections and referenda, as techniques for finding out local policy preferences, are the most important in terms of their impact on self-government functioning, but they should still be viewed as extraordinary techniques. Using them alone the real and active participation of citizens in the life of community.

The palette of techniques for citizen participation is much richer. The above-mentioned research among mayors gives an account of most important sources from which the mayor finds out about public opinion. Results rank as follows (with respect to frequency of choosing the one source as most important):

- personal contacts with individual citizens (56.9%);
- public meetings of citizens (18.1%);
- town (community) authority, i.e. from officials (8.3%);
- visiting hours at town halls (8.2%);
- family, relatives, and friends (5.6%);
- representatives of organizations (1.0%);
- information in local media (0.8%);
- my working place (0.8%; in the case of re-elected mayors), and,
- citizens' letters (0.4%).

Individual weights of sources mentioned above differ significantly. Though that list of sources is rather comprehensive, other procedures should be added. To understand various techniques of finding out about public preferences in local policies, including ways to apply their results, we tried here to arrange them in a sort of classification. This way, it will be possible to find certain indicators of their use and effectiveness during the past years in the Czech Republic. The list of these techniques arose from the analysis of available sources and in this way it mirrors real-life problems. (This is presented in the appendix.)

Another reason we introduced the list of techniques for finding out about public preferences in local policy, was to stress the following:

- These techniques are quite diverse, and without understanding them it is not possible to analyze their effectiveness.

- To understand these techniques well, a comprehensive survey should be carried out. Data currently available cannot provide systematic information about any one of them.
- This sort of list could help to create certain means of measurements for analysis of communication between citizens and the council.

3.2.3 “Communicating Town”

An original approach, which serves both to research in and development of two-way communication between municipal councils and citizens, was worked out by Věra and Miroslav Foret, Brno [24]. This method has been implemented both in the Czech and Slovak Republics.

Since 1994, the project “Communicating Town” has been underway in the Czech Republic. Since 1995, the project has received financial support from the Open Society Fund in Prague.¹¹

The main goal of the “Communicating Town” project is to improve democratic functioning of public administration, to help in building civic society by strengthening positive relations between the authority and the public, and to make the public administration learn how to create room for citizen participation in decision making about both concrete problems and long-term concepts of town development, including support of business and solving of unemployment.

In cooperation with the Faculty of Economics (IROMAR) of Matej Bela University in Banská Bystrica, the “Communicating Town” project has been in the Slovak Republic since 1996. Towns attached to the project can be divided into three size categories:

- *small towns* with about 1 000 inhabitants were represented by Bořetice, Dačice, Lázně Bohdaneč, Loštice, Mikulov (and in Slovakia: Kremnica and Nová Baňa);
- *medium towns* with a population of less than 10 000 were Brno—Královo Pole, Brno—Slatina, Breclav, Český Krumlov, Havlíčkův Brod, Klatovy, Rokycany, Šternberk, Svitavy, Kopřivnice, Třebíč, Frenštát pod Radhoštěm, Kutná Hora, Uherské Hradiště (and in Slovakia: Košice—Ľahanovce, Pezinok, and Trenčín);
- *big towns* with up to 100 000 inhabitants were Brno, Hradec Králové, Liberec, Plzeň, Ostrava, Olomouc, Zlín (and in Slovakia: Banská Bystrica and Prešov).

The “Communicating Town” project confirmed great differences between small and big towns with respect to communication and relations of citizens, state administration, and self-government. In bigger towns, the communication of town halls with citizens is more complex, more demanding—and worse. Another element of differentiation is level of education, which gives people greater ability to find their bearings in the society. People with higher education are more active, more satisfied and they are more easily oriented in mechanisms of state administration and self-government.

If it is our matter of concern to give a certain piece of information to its addressee, our success depends heavily on our knowledge of the addressee and on proper selection of communication strategy, communication channels, and means of feedback verification. The point in question is that in addition to unilateral legislative measures, there should be a system helping communication between town hall and citizens. Legislative rules coordinate our lives. But if we are not able to make clear why these restrictions are necessary, what benefits and social values they bring, and what are the impacts of their breaching, citizens may perceive them only as cosmetic and largely artificial.

Among the project's findings, citizens think press to be the most appropriate means of information. That is why most town halls issue their own newsletters. But a sole town hall newsletter is no solution to problems of public information. This is essentially a more complex problem linked to an image of Municipal Authority and its culture of behavior.

The complexity of the problem can be exemplified in the case of the district capital of Svitavy. The town hall made everything possible to inform citizens about housing problems. Two issues of the local newspaper were devoted to information on the plans and intentions of the local authorities in house and flat construction.

The newsletters were sent free of charge to all households. But in a survey on a representative sample of citizens, only 30% of them gave a positive answer to the question "Are you sufficiently informed about town plans in the area of housing development?". This implies that the responsibility of the town hall does not end with publication of informational material. An organized campaign is needed to ensure that all citizens grasp the usefulness of reading the material. (It is also necessary to help those who we can suppose would probably not understand much of the material.)

Within the project, town halls and public were informed about the possibilities of the TELE-CITIES program, about Internet use and other technical matters that make communication easier. At the survey held in Třebíč, the municipality authority was interested in asking citizens whether they have a computer at their disposal at home. Computers of any sort were owned by only 20% of respondents.

The project also showed, that the strategic plan of development or the long-term concept is very often confused with the territorial plan. If the town hall, in cooperation with experts and town inhabitants, does not succeed in creating a vision and strategy and gain its approval by the council, the same unsolvable situations repeat themselves time and time again, and the officials hardly find it possible to explain decisions to citizens. Many citizens feel the present coordinating and development activities to be nuisances, and not any part of a gradual process of improving a matter of common interest. This explains the low level of interest in budget and little knowledge about it implying their mistrust of town-hall management.

As the most eminent problem, mutual communication among particular town hall sections deserves special attention. For this purpose, a methodology of analysis of inner authority culture was developed and tested in 1997. Using a questionnaire form, it helps to disclose what obstacles exist to hamper this section's inclusion into the municipal authority.

3.2.4 Analysis of "Civic Potential"

Analysis of civic potential—a method for finding out about the activity levels of a community's citizens [25]—was developed for use in the Slovak Republic, but is well applicable in other countries, especially in the Czech Republic. Analysis of a settlement's civic potential is based on knowledge that participation is a necessary condition for maintaining and developing an open society.

To achieve effective citizens' participation, three types of conditions must be created:

- development of legislative conditions which support self-government duties;
- civic and political rights being gained by each inhabitant, and,
- implementation of participation in decision making and realization of projects, which improve the situation in settlement societies.

As the first two conditions can be supposed to be fulfilled in a democratic society (or being under deliberate process of their fulfillment), the decisive one is the last condition. It is based on the existence of a certain potential, the "Civic Potential", which would serve as a source of energy for such participation.

The notion of the Civic Potential can be better understood by listing steps of a procedure used to research and assess this potential:

- *Potential of local acceptance of democratic principles* is measured using activity models. Respondents are asked if they agree with a given solution, or not.
- *Knowledge potential*: Submitted activity models are assessed according to their agreement with valid legal norms.
- *Action potential*: Respondents are given about 15 types of activities undertaken in the community, and then state whether they participate in them. The level of satisfaction with these activities is measured, too, and the activity with the highest participation is selected.
- *Associating potential*: The level of cooperation in selected associating activities in the community is assessed.
- *Information potential*: Citizens' level of acquaintance with particular areas of community life and of self-government structure are assessed.

- *Value background:* Assessment is made of the importance of submitted values, which are linked with civic values or virtues (e.g., weight of entrepreneurial spirit, independence of decision making, assuming responsibility, free expression of own opinion, creativity, civic responsibility, etc.) and ethic values (i.e., integrity, industry, solidarity, etc.).

Based on respondents' answers, it is possible to create summary characteristics both of the community and of certain groups of inhabitants or of territorial parts of the community depending on the participation potential expressed. All measured components have the same weight and scale, what allows for aggregate data to be entered into typologies or summary indices, and to create models. Using multidimensional scaling, a comparison of the state of civic potential can be made among different communities, in different time intervals, with respect to changes in community councils, and to assessing the effectiveness of council performances. This means that presentation and realization of the knowledge gained with that method could be viewed as a procedure for projecting public wishes into council activities.

3.2.5 Communities' Internet Use in Communicating with Citizens

Internet usage has grown steadily during the last few years in the Czech Republic. For this study, we attempted to collect basic information of Internet use as a communications tool between communities and their citizens. Of course, the picture presented here cannot be complete in any sense. It is caused partly by the nature of the Internet itself, and partly by the absence of any serious effort to either centralize or standardize that kind of information, (although the first, somewhat tentative steps are under way). Without a doubt, the subject of Internet use by various types of community deserves further, comprehensive study.

The following chapter describes the situation between August and November 2000. We were mainly concerned with form and structure of presentation. We also left aside the problems of presentation, as no reasonable analysis could be made with the data available. The contents could be shown only on examples, a few of which we have at our disposal.

3.2.5.1 *How to Find Communities for the Purposes of Analysis*

There are now portals devoted to various Czech towns and communities. They offer various services from placing WEB pages to their creation and maintenance. For example:

- <http://mesta.obce.cz>
Center of Towns and Communities of the Czech Republic, operated by Czech Publishing for Internet, Ltd., as an official project of the Czech Union of Towns and Communities. The Center provides an outline of communities, mayors, contacts, e-mail addresses, homepages, notice boards, catalogue of suppliers to towns and communities, Golden Coat of Arms, and Village of the Year contests, and discussion forums on towns and communities.

- <http://www.dvs.cz>
(operated by Triada Ltd.) provides public administration daily online; references to the Office of the Government, the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, and Ministries; current issues, news, housing, etc.

There are many domestic and foreign searching programs, which find a wide audience on the Internet. This could be another way to determine a sample for future analysis. As an example, we give two search machines with results of the search for a notion “*mìsta a obce*” (towns and communities):

- www.centrum.cz: 71 references
- www.seznam.cz: 85 references

Another way to select a sample of towns and communities for further analysis of their Internet pages could be to set up a list of selected communities to search for their Internet presentations. This would be a good (and perhaps the only) way to determine the number of communities which do not yet have web pages of their own.

3.2.5.2 *Placement of Internet Presentations*

There are special servers, which deal with placement of web pages of towns and communities. For example:

- <http://mesta.obce.cz/stochov/>
Stochov (a town in the central Bohemian district of Kladno) – basic information.
- <http://mesta.obce.cz/sumperk/>
Šumperk; a town on the Desná river

Towns and communities web pages are also placed on servers of commercial firms (providers). For example:

- <http://web.telecom.cz/ouzavisice>
Závišice – informational server of the community Závišice, information about community, community newsletter
- <http://www.apsa.cz/obce/krudoli/>
community Krásné údolí

Some communities have domains of their own. For example:

- <http://www.obec.kamyk.cz/>
official pages of the Kamyk nad Vltavou community in central Bohemia. The website includes a history of the community, local tourist attractions, etc.

- <http://www.vetrusice.cz/>
official pages of the community Větrušice – topography, industry and agriculture, culture, sport, history, community authority, etc.

3.2.5.3 Content of Communities' Internet Presentations

Assessing the quality of an Internet presentation is a rather subjective matter. This is true, even though it is possible to distinguish three groups of community presentations with respect to their technical prowess in providing information. These are:

- textual information only, simple references;
- textual information placed in frames, hypertext references, menu, photographs, and,
- textual information in frames, referencing buttons, pictures interlinked with references, graphic applications, etc.

The technical realization of Internet presentations depends almost entirely on the capabilities of the community. There are multiple technical means available, including simple html language, cascade styles, ASP technology, etc. Other qualitative characteristics, which should be taken into consideration, can be:

- to what extent the WEB-page is included in search-machines (can serve as an indicator of the page supervisor's perseverance);
- what is a response of the WEB-page to a signal (e.g. how quick is a response to an e-mail message and what is its quality);
- continuity of updating.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In a 1991 comprehensive sociological survey focusing on values and value orientations [26], 55% of respondents agreed with this statement: "*dialogue with authorities is essentially futile, because they are not very interested in the problems of common people*"¹². Disagreement with that statement was expressed by 40% of respondents. Perhaps this attitude can be seen as a residuum of the past, but we don't know to what level this might be the case.

What we *do* know is that:

- There is a direct proportional link between citizens' establishing regular contact with authorities in their local self-government, and an overall improvement of public attitudes towards self-government in general, and,

- In spite of the generally negative opinions mentioned above by many citizens, the level of overall public satisfaction with local government and its performance is growing.

Information brought together in this study hopefully provides some useful knowledge about the situation in our country. But it is obvious that serious attitudinal problems remain that demand further study.

4.1 Problems of Citizens' Influence on the State and Development of Local Government

The ways in which citizens can influence local government can be viewed as a part of a broader vision of effective civil society, especially as it relates to mutual communication between the general public and local self-governments. Effective communication is therefore a necessary condition for the realization of successful local policy. This implies that the analysis of citizens' influence on the development of self-government cannot be done without keeping that wider context firmly in mind.

The present study is a probe into such problems, trying to sketch some of their important aspects. Besides the survey held at the *Mayor 2000* meeting [22], data from existing researches and analyses were used. The resulting picture implies some more general pieces of knowledge:

- In the area of public influence on the state and development of community self-government in the Czech Republic, the procedures and forms in accordance with the law have been respected for the most part. Local councils rarely go beyond the limits of their legal duties. But even ordinary citizens overwhelmingly take advantage of only a fraction of the legal rights they have at their disposal.
- Mutually helpful rapport between authorities and citizens is rather infrequent. Most communication more closely resembles a struggle (on the one hand the defending citizen and the means of his defense, on the other hand the community authority secluding itself from its public). Attributes of this struggle are significant for the Czech political scene in general. Naturally, these attributes are significant for the development of public-local government interaction, too.
- Citizens use only a few forms to influence the development of local self-government. Opportunities in this area keep on being untested. It can be said, however, that most of these possibilities are unknown or unappreciated by either the public, or by local representatives of community self-government. This is generally true in spite of the fact that a slowly growing number of people express an interest in local policies and the councilors mention the public influence on their activities as a decisive factor.
- The level of public respect for and confidence in self-government in general is still more of a lofty ideal than a concrete reality. Councils usually undertake no systematic activities

aimed at initiating public influence on community life. Their activities are rather haphazard, and/or dictated by prevailing laws, (i.e., mainly dealing with citizens' complaints).

- The situation concerning citizens' general antipathy towards politics in general is strongly supported by popular media, and above all by central political authorities. This corresponds with a predominant conviction that citizens' activities are in fact the manifestations of political instability and lack of responsibility. This somewhat paranoid suspicion can be explained as a psychological inheritance of the totalitarian recent past.
- This situation is further worsened by the fact that a majority of citizens have not felt psychologically prepared to play any active role in self-government since the transition from socialism. Opportunities to consider the ins and outs of civics have been rare.

In the Czech Republic, there are many obstacles still to be overcome in the area of developing citizen-local self-government rapport. One way of hopefully minimizing these obstacles is a cross-the-board enhancement and enrichment of the public's awareness of the most important aspects of these lingering problems.

4.2 Research in Communication Between Citizens and Community Councils

To better understand the problems of citizen-community council's communication, standard research methods should be used in:

- The analysis based on the "civic potential" (see section 3.2.4) represents a good basis for the subject matter of this study. The "civic potential" procedure could be further elaborated with respect to a more precise operational definition of some criteria, supplemented with accepted methods of empirical analysis of existing data [27].
- In Section 3.2.2 and in the Appendix, an outline of techniques is suggested that can be used for citizens' influence on the state and development on self-government in the community. It could serve as a source for more detailed and more comprehensive analysis in the future.
- Further analysis of the problems of communication between the public and community councils would be of much help in the Czech Republic, especially if it helped make useful comparisons with neighboring countries easier.

4.3 General Lessons, Suggestions and Noteworthy Methods

Though the study represents only a probe into a wide area of problems, there are many interesting suggestions and methods, which can be widely applied. For example:

- At present, the Internet is used in a very small minority of communities, but in the near future all community authorities in The Czech Republic should be provided with at least one computer on the Net.
- There are no universal means for exerting public influence on community councils. This is particularly true in smaller communities. Personal contact between councilors with citizens will always be the strongest and most influential means of communication.
- Education in the area of communication is lacking among both citizens and councilors. It is most striking among mayors, who often verbally state that the citizens influence on their decisions and activities, is of overriding importance to them. But in fact, most mayors are not accustomed to taking such influence into consideration as a regular part of their duties. Councilors should also be more aware of certain basic learn the communication techniques regarding public relations, especially the fact that positive public interaction is a major asset towards mutual understanding.
- The continuation and development of the “Communicating Town” project (see section 3.2.3) represents a concrete step. The project combines instruction about methods for better communication within communities, and their application.
- Towards this objective, it would be advisable to categorize suggestions and methods that have proven over time to be practically useful in various communities, and to publish them in a comprehensive report or reports. The present periodicals (even the specialized ones) still only achieve this at a minimum level.

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APPENDIX

Techniques of Communication Between Community Councils and Citizens

These techniques make part of two-way communication between community self-government body and citizens (either as individuals, groups, or organizations). In the following list, we do not mention elections and referenda. We propose dividing these techniques into six groups:

- General techniques re. communicating with self-government;
 - Institutional techniques re. communicating with self-government;
 - Techniques re. communication from within authorities and councils;
 - Techniques based on expert (i.e., independent) procedures;
 - Techniques re. regular meetings and more general communication, and,
 - Selected techniques re. communication from councils toward citizens
- a) General Techniques of Communication with Self-government
- founding citizen associations organizations;
 - creating ad hoc citizen initiatives and their activities;
 - legal redress;
 - preparation and presentation of petitions;
 - public demonstrations;
 - public protests (e.g., blockades, occupation of an office or working shop, etc.);
 - lodging formal complaints;
 - submission of data;
 - media publications;
 - participation in special commissions and committees of the council;
 - participation in political parties;
 - participation in activities of lobbying groups;
 - speaking at council meetings;
 - speaking out at public meeting with the mayor or other councilor;
 - written notifications;

- inquiries from mayor or councilor during public hours;
 - inquiries from the community authority during public hours, and,
 - discussions with fellow citizens.
- b) Institutions' Techniques in Communication with Self-government
- communication from entrepreneurs;
 - communication from entrepreneurial associations (i.e., chambers, groups, professional organizations);
 - communication from interest groups and organizations;
 - communication from churches and religious associations;
 - communication from representatives of city controlled institutions (i.e., specialized city services, educational institutions, etc.);
 - communication from district organs of the national government;
 - communication directly from the national government;
 - communication from regional councils, and,
 - communication from other political parties not represented in community councils.
- c) Techniques of Communication from within the Authority and the Council
- inner rules for the preparation and handling of records and papers for the mayor;
 - inner rules for the preparation and handling of records and papers for board of council meetings;
 - council rules of procedure;
 - structure and forms of communication within the authority toward the secretary (i.e. the head official of the authority);
 - organizational and informational norms of communication of particular sections of community authority;
 - organizational and informational norms of communication among particular branches of community authority;
 - communication from special commissions and committees toward sections of community authority;
 - communication from special commissions and committees toward mayor, board of council, and council meeting, and,
 - working papers and analyses of political clubs for council meetings. (by councilors)

d) Techniques Based on Expert (Independent) Procedures

- various types of public opinion surveys;
- press analyses;
- comparative analyses of approaches of other self-government bodies;
- analyses of “civic potential”, and,
- sets of research procedures for more complex communication of community council with citizens.

e) Techniques of Common Meeting and Communication

- activities of local and national media;
- use of the Internet;
- common interest activities of citizens and councilors;
- common social activities of citizens and councilors;
- communication within families;
- communication among friends, and,
- communication at place of work (for mayors who exercise their function along with their conventional professions).

f) Selected Techniques of Communication from the Council Toward Citizens

- council public sessions;
- targeted meetings with citizens (i.e., “mayor’s days”, etc.);
- public discussions on important problems of the community;
- public negotiation given by law, (e.g. environment impact assessments, etc.);
- publication of council meeting minutes;
- use of an official bulletin board;
- publishing of town hall bulletins (i.e., newsletters);
- answering letters;
- dealing with complaints;
- range, frequency, and setting of visiting hours;
- mechanisms of communication with citizens in the case of dealing with obligatory documents, and,
- verbal reports.

There is no doubt that other techniques exist or can be developed for finding out about public preferences regarding local policy initiatives, and reactions to them. For example, with regard to dealing with communication from the council to citizens we selected those that can be expected to receive direct response from citizens.

NOTES

- ¹ Percentage of satisfied respondents for small communities (up to 500 inhabitants), i.e. 60%, is not significantly different from that for next small communities (500–2 000), i.e., 66% (sample size was 1 093).
- ² This satisfaction indicator is highly significant, as local police forces are established and fully overseen by local self-governments.
- ³ Parties—OF—*Občanské Forum* (Civic Forum), KSC—*Komunistická strana Československa* (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), KDU—*Křesťanská demokratická unie* (Christian Democratic Union), MORSL—*Sdružení za samosprávu Moravy a Slezska* (Association for Self-Government of Moravia and Silesia).
- ⁴ Parties: KDU—*ČSL* (Christian Democratic Union—Czech People Party); ODS (Civic Democratic Party); KSĚM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia); ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party); SPR—*RSČ* (Republican Party of Czechoslovakia)
- ⁵ Parties: CSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party), ODS (Civic Democratic Party), KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), KDU—*ČSL* (Christian Democratic Union – Czech People’s Party), US—*Unie Svobody* (Union of Liberty).
- ⁶ Parties: ODS (Civic Democratic Party); 4K (Foursome Coalition of Christian Democrats + Union of Liberty + Civic Democratic Union + Democratic Union); KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia); ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party);, and the “other 6” —Independents having gained mandates
- ⁷ Parties: OF—*Občanské forum* (Civic Forum; its main successors were ODS and ODA); ODS—*Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democratic Party *after* split with US); US – *Unie svobody* (Union of Liberty); ODA—*Občanská demokratická aliance* (Civic Democratic Alliance); KDU—*ČSL*—*Křesťanskodemokratická unie*—*Česká strana lidová* (Christian Democratic Union—Czech People’s Party); KSČM—*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy* (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia; in 1990 and 1992, various successors of former Communist Party of Czechoslovakia); ČSSD—*Česká strana sociálnědemokratická* (Czech Social-Democratic Party)
- ⁸ Parties: 4K—*Ctyřkoalice* (Foursome Coalition consisting of KDU—*ČSL*, US, ODA, and DEU); DEU—*Demokratická unie* (Democratic Union)
- ⁹ *Věřejná správa* (Public Administration), weekly of the Government of The Czech Republic, Prague
Moderní obec (Modern Community), monthly, *Economia*, a. s., Prague
- ¹⁰ The exact number of those referenda is not known at the national level, because the Ministry of the Interior deals with them as with any other ordinary administrative procedure. This

means that only persons directly concerned can study the materials, which are archived in sequence without any subject references or subject summaries.

¹¹ The project developing a set of means for communication of citizens with council is described in the following publications:

- Foret, M.: *Komunikace s veřejností* (Communication with the Public), Masaryk University, Brno, 1994
- Foretová, V.–Foret, M.: *Komunikující město* (Communicating Town), Masaryk University, Brno, 1996

Other lessons and experience drawn from the project are comprised above all in publications:

- Foretová, V.–Foret, M.–Gole, J.: *Communicating Town*, Masaryk University, Brno, 1998
- Foretová, V.–Foret, M.: *Communicating Town and Regional Development*, Masaryk University, Brno, 1999
- Foretová, V.–Foret, M.: *The Council and the Public*, The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe, Bratislava, 2000

¹² The authorities with whom citizens get in touch in the overwhelming majority of cases, are local, (i.e. authorities under direct control and responsibility of local self-governments.)

Hopes and Reality:
The First Decade of
the Hungarian
Local Government System
in the Eyes of the Public

György Hajnal

*Data sets of 2000 national public opinion survey and the 1995–1999 city surveys
were prepared with the substantial help of József Kiss.*

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

1.1 Scope and Method of the Study

This dissertation surveys the problem areas of public opinion-local government relationships in Hungary during the 1990–2000 period. Its main questions correspond to the requirements of the multi-country comparative study of which it is a part. The paper surveys the problem area along four main dimensions:

- general citizen assessment of local governments' performance;
- public opinion—and its influence—on the macro level institutional/legal setup of the local government system,
- an assessment of (i) to what extent, and (ii) by what means local policy makers try to learn about their constituencies' policy preferences.

The paper's approach to these questions is twofold. First, it seeks to identify, evaluate, and explain possible trends in the above four dimensions. Second, it attempts to describe and to provide some explanations for the existing state of affairs by analyzing interrelations among the above phenomena and some explanatory variables. It is hoped that the paper's conclusions—in a multi-country comparative context—will form a basis for further conclusions and relevant generalizations.

The analysis relies on quantitative data analysis as much as the parameters of the research would permit. The most important of these constraints were that conclusions had to be based on the secondary analysis of already existing and available data. Quantitative statistical analyses were based on the data sets below:

- The Medián (1991) data set: A nationally representative questionnaire survey of the adult population of Hungary conducted by Medián with a sample 1 200 respondents in June 1991 (managers: Tamás M. Horváth and Gábor Péteri; see Horváth, Péteri (1993) and Baldesheim et. al. (1996b).
- The Jelenkutató (1995–1998) data set: A series of public opinion surveys conducted by the Jelenkutató Foundation in various Hungarian towns and cities between 1995 and 1998 (manager: József Kiss). The survey samples represent the adult population of the individual settlements (Kiss, Kabai, Dénes, 2001).
- The Jelenkutató (2000) data set: A nationally representative questionnaire survey (manager: József Kiss) of the adult population of Hungary conducted by the Jelenkutató Foundation with a sample of 2 000 respondents in May 2000.
- National Office of Elections data: the National Office of Elections provided election turnout data for all Hungarian settlements.

- The PMO (2000) data set: A questionnaire survey conducted by the Prime Minister's Office (program manager: Péter Csegény) of Chief Officers of Hungarian towns' local governments (except for Budapest). (Of the possible 199 towns, 159 returned the questionnaires.)
- The National Statistical Agency provided general statistical data on settlements. These data were attached to most of the other databases in order to perform joint analyses. In some important cases, however, no quantitative data was available. Consequently, at some points in our analysis we had to rely extensively on case-based empirical evidence and intuitive expert judgements.

Finally, some technical remarks are in order.

- In the selection and presentation of statistical procedures, we tried to keep the level of technical jargon to a fairly minimal level. For this reason, we usually restrict ourselves to specifying the statistical procedure used and some overall indicator of their results (usually significance level, denoted as “sig”).
- Throughout the study, we treated opinion variables as being on an interval/ratio level scale (i.e., we used them in calculating means, correlations, etc.). Although this might be questionable on theoretical grounds, in our view it is justified by the existing practice of public opinion research and other practical considerations.
- Although Budapest consists of 23 districts, for both practical and theoretical reasons it is treated as one settlement. District-level local governments are simply omitted from the analysis.

1.2 Basic Information on the Hungarian Local Government System

The starting point in the recent development of the Hungarian local government system was the 1990 Act on Local Government (1990/LXV. Tv.). This established the local-territorial dimension of representative, democratic governance.² The Act declared the right of every local community—practically meaning every settlement—to have its own independent, elected local government. As a consequence, from 1990 until 1991 the 1 586 Soviet-type local entities transformed into 3 047 autonomous local governmental units.

Another important feature of the Act was that it replaced the hierarchical chain of administrative and political network of relationships among settlements—reaching from Budapest and the county centers to the sub-regional level (until 1981), and to each village—with the legally guaranteed equal status of local and territorial (county) governments.

The territory of Hungary, 93 030 square kilometers in area, is divided into 19 counties and the agglomeration of Budapest. As of January 2000, the country's 10.04 million citizens lived in 3 135 settlements, of which there were:

- 2 913 villages;
- 199 towns;
- 22 cities of county status, and,
- the capital, Budapest.

Table 3.1 describes the size structure of basic local governmental units.

Table 3.1
Size Structure of Local Governments in Hungary (1999)

Population Size	% of Total Population	% of Total Number of LGs
–500	2.7	31.5
501–2 000	14.0	43.2
2 001–10 000	24.1	20.8
10 001–25 000	14.4	3.0
25 001–100 000	15.7	1.2
100 001–300 000	11.5	0.3
Capital	17.6	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: Calculated from National Office for Statistics Data

It can be seen that—measured by international standards—the average size of basic local governmental units is quite small. If we take the large extent of municipal autonomy and wide spectrum of municipal responsibility into account, then the extent of decentralization in the Hungarian local governmental system is extremely large.

The building blocks of the new local government system are municipal level (except in the case of Budapest, where they are district level) self-governments (“*települési önkormányzat*”), and county level self-governments (“*megyei önkormányzat*”). (In the case of Budapest, the equivalent is the Local Government of Metropolitan Budapest.). The distribution of tasks and responsibilities among them is based purely on the spatial characteristics of public (including administrative)

services provided by them. This does not entail administrative, supervisory duties. Thus, for example, basic educational, medical, etc. services are run by local self-governments, whereas institutions providing higher level services for a larger mass of users are run by the county (or Budapest) self-governments.³

Legal supervision of both tiers of local government is exercised by the County State Administrative Offices, which function as overseers of the legality of municipal activities. They have the right to sue local governments that have allegedly broken the law. In addition, unlawful or unconstitutional legal measures of local governments can be brought to the Constitutional Court. The State Audit Office exercises financial supervision of local government organs.

Three central elements of the internal structure of local governments are: the body of representatives (*“képviselőtestület”*), (which in the case of larger councils are supplemented by various commissions); the directly elected mayor (*“polgármester”*), and the mayor’s office (*“polgármesteri hivatal”*). The mayor’s office provides administrative support for the council and the mayor, and has essential duties as the basic local unit of state authority (i.e., application and enforcement of the law). The “notary” (chief officer) of the municipality and the employees of the local administrative apparatus are all civil servants. Local government politicians—meaning the councilors and the mayor—are elected directly every four years.

The electoral system is rather complex. Consequently, we mainly restrict ourselves to giving a brief account of its functioning on the lower tier of local governance (settlement level). Representatives of local government councils are elected in one of two different ways, depending on the size of the settlement:

- Settlements under a population of 10 000 form a single constituency. Citizens give their votes—on a single ballot—on as many candidates as there are seats in the council of representatives.
- Settlements above a population of 10 000 have a mixed electoral system. Approximately 60% of representatives are elected in individual constituencies. Meanwhile, 40% of them are elected on lists in a proportional system.

The election system of local governments obtained its present form as a result of the 1994 modifications of local-territorial governance. Important changes were that the second round of local governmental elections was eliminated. From that point onward, mayors have been elected directly not only in smaller settlements, but also in settlements of over 10 000.

Local governments have a broad field of task in public service delivery, which includes—among others—education, health care, social services, management of water, sewage, and electric energy systems, local public transportation, and local fire services.

2. THE GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS BY THE PUBLIC

Two central features of the local government reform of 1990 were *democratization*, which based the government of the local and territorial levels under the control of elected representatives, and *decentralization*, which removed the formerly existing hierarchical and centralist network of relationships between various settlements and tiers of local and territorial governance. The first feature doesn't need much clarification. Decentralization, however, had a distinct role in the context of local government reform; it offered the settlements a plausible opportunity to get rid of the unpopular control and supervision of the higher level(s) of local-territorial administration. Settlements of "higher ranks"—usually meaning the administrative centers of neighboring associated townships, district centers (until 1981), or the county—previously often managed to suppress substantial local interests in the interests of competing for central resources, infrastructural investments, etc.

2.1 Initial Expectations (1990–1991)

Two main features can characterize the initial attitude towards the new local government system:

- (a) The overall attitude towards the new system can be described as being somewhere between benevolent neutrality and uncertain skepticism. This attitude was found to be largely homogenous throughout the entire population with regards to social status indicators (i.e., personal incomes, educational levels), and certain settlement characteristics (i.e., types of settlement).
- (b) There is one recognizable pattern in the initial attitude of the public that deserves further study. Citizens of smaller communities have distinctly more favorable opinions on the local government system. This can be attributed to higher expectations that the new system would "liberate" these settlements from the long-suffered dominance of higher levels of administrative hierarchy. These were most often regarded as county-level tiers of local-territorial administration, or, even more often, the larger and more influential townships that were often the centers of joint council administrations of neighboring villages. This "inter-community democracy/equity" was an important legitimizing factor of the newly established local government system.

In the paragraphs below, we will briefly present the empirical evidence supporting the above hypotheses.⁴ The analysis is based on two kinds of data: citizens' own assessments, and election turnout data. While the meaning of the first measure is straightforward, turnout data is mainly used as a proxy measure of citizen interest in the "given" (i.e., parliamentary or local governmental) arenas of politics.

Ad (a):

The public discourse of 1990 (which was largely dominated by party politics), including the national media and “expert opinions”, regarded the creation of the new local government system with enthusiasm. Although to a substantially lesser extent, research indicated that this positive attitude was somewhat reflected by public opinion in Summer, 1991:

Table 3.2
**Citizens’ Assessment of the New Local Government System
versus the Communist⁵ System (1991)**

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	1.00 much worse	39	3.9	4.3	4.3
	2.00 worse	58	5.7	6.4	10.7
	3.00 same	407	40.6	45.3	56.0
	4.00 better	342	34.1	38.1	94.0
	5.00 much better	54	5.3	6.0	100.0
	Total	899	89.7	100.0	
Missing	System	104	10.3		
Total		1 002	100.0		

SOURCE: Calculated from Medián (1991) survey data

The average evaluation of the changes for the entire population was slightly positive, (3.35). The proportion of those perceiving positive changes is about four times larger than the proportion perceiving negative trends. The most spectacular feature of the above distribution of responses is the large proportion of “same” answers which, together with those respondents refusing to answer, form the absolute majority of responses. This can be attributed to the apathy, disillusion, and disorientation of the population, which in turn had two broad sets of determining factors. The first was related to the alienating effects of most political discourse, which was characterized by fierce, ideologically motivated debates perceived as largely irrelevant by many citizens. The second set of factors is related to the rapid deterioration of many citizens’ living standards and the well-known consequences resulting from this process [Kolosi, Tóth, Vukovich, 2000].

Still, the fact that the Communist local administration was rated relatively so “high” is remarkable if we consider that the dominant public discourse of the time unanimously and unconditionally rejected everything that could be perceived as part of the Communist heritage. Furthermore, the

reference point in time selected by the designers of the questionnaire used as a basis of comparison was “two years earlier”—that is, 1989. 1989 was the time of the salient “end-stage” crisis of everything that belonged to the Communist regime, including its local administrative system. Thus the period was, of course, far from being a typical, “representative” state of affairs.

Despite the fact that the average ratings are positive (and this is true in all settlement categories), another interpretation of the data might be that 56% of the population evaluated the new system as “the same or worse” than the Communist one. A peculiar feature of these opinions is that they are independent of such important social and demographic indicators as age, education, or personal income.

This fact gives some credence to our presumption that these initial evaluations reflect expectations *vis-à-vis* the new system—or, to put it another way, they reflect ideological predispositions more than real experiences. This is not surprising if we take into account that these evaluations took place only about six to eight months after the creation of the fundamentally new institutional framework. (In a few years, the rapid and strong polarization of Hungarian society into “winners” and “losers” will have a definite impact on popular evaluations of the new era.)

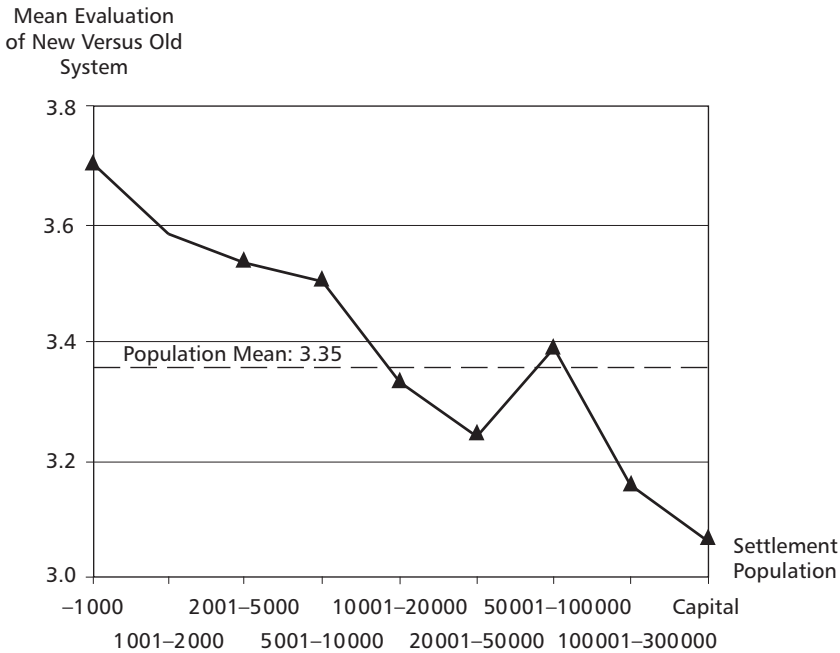
Ad (b):

Settlement size has a significant impact on any comparisons between the Communist and the new local administration. This finding sheds some light on one of the most important legitimizing features of the new local government system. Since the end of the 80s—as reflected by the dominant tone of mass media, expert opinions, and the adopted Law on Local Governments itself—“democratization” meant not only freely elected local government decision-making political bodies. It also seemed to be a prerequisite for the democratization and legitimacy of the new local government system. The new system’s primary aims were to abolish the hierarchical relationships between tiers of local-territorial administration, and to put an end to the subordination of the interests of townships to those of larger or more powerful neighboring “big brothers”. Thus, not only citizens, but also local communities were expected to have “equal rights”.⁶ About 31% of the population of Hungary perceived “substantial changes” half a year after the creation of the new institutions of local governance, compared to the previous state of affairs.⁷ However, this proportion was 57% in townships below 1 000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, this was the case for only 16% in the capital and 23% in cities between 100 000 and 300 000 inhabitants. This relationship is significant (ANOVA sig<0.0005) and largely consistent. The direction of the perceived change is reflected by assertions regarding the performance of the new system in comparison with the old one.

These answers reassure the above patterns: the mean rating of the new system is 3.7 in townships below 1 000 inhabitants, and about 3.1–3.2 in Budapest and the largest cities (see figure below; ANOVA sig<0.0005).

Both variables are independent from—and cannot be “explained away” by—such social and demographic factors as education, personal income, or age.

Figure 3.1
Citizens’ Assessments of the New versus the Communist Local Government System in Various Settlement Size Categories (1991)
 (1= “much worse”, 3= “same”, 5= “much better”)



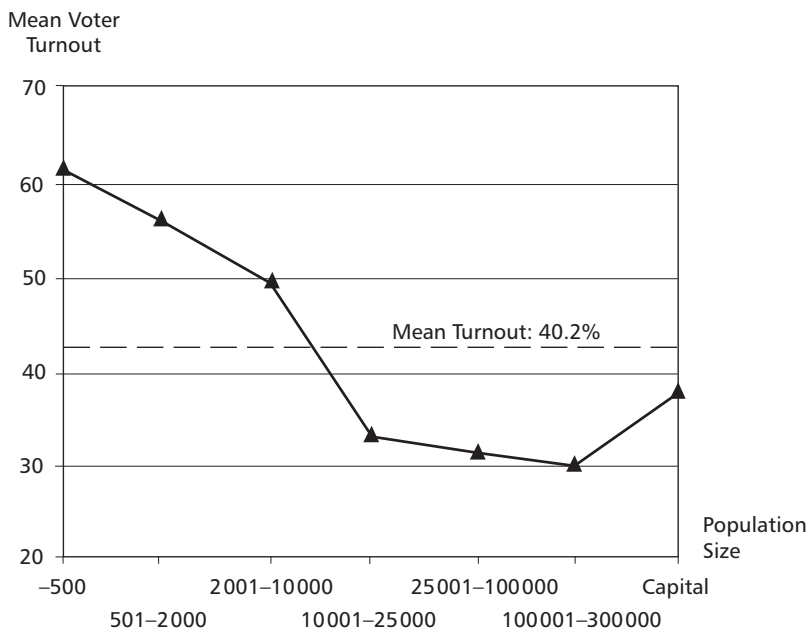
SOURCE: Calculated from Medián (1991) survey data

Turnout data of the 1990 local elections also reinforce the above pattern. Citizens from villages of under 500 inhabitants participated more than twice as often in local elections than the least participative sectors from larger communities (61%, as opposed to 30%). The substantially larger voting activity in smaller settlements seems to support the idea of larger legitimacy and more favorable attitudes towards the new local government system.

The consistently negative relationship between population size and voter turnout—apart from Budapest, where, due to factors that we discuss later on, turnout rose again to 37%—is statistically significant (linear correlation coefficient $r=-0,15$, $\text{sig}<0.0005$). Furthermore, this relationship is

not “explained away” by other factors such as the average educational level of the population, or the proportion of elderly people among citizens, although these factors also significantly influence election turnout.

Figure 3.2
Voter Turnout in Various Settlement Size Categories
During the 1990 Local Government Elections [%]



SOURCE: Calculated from Office of Elections data

2.2 From Hopes to Reality: Trends of the 90s (1991–2000)

As we noted in the technical section there are two, methodologically well grounded pillars between which the more or less detailed evaluation of the trends and processes of the nineties spanned: the Medián (1991), and the Jelenkutató (2000) national questionnaire surveys. Between these two historical moments, there are only sporadic pieces of quantitative, longitudinal information (mainly the Jelenkutató 1995–1998 city surveys), dispersed in time and space, and some qualitative assessments and analytical considerations that help us in delineating and understanding what

has happened. Nevertheless, in certain substantial dimensions, the patterns of change seem to be quite clear-cut. This allows for a relatively straightforward interpretation, even considering the lack of nationally representative, mid-period data.

Our main conclusions are as follows:

- (a) A main trend of the 90s was the disillusionment from the (relatively modest) hopes and expectations that could be detected at the beginning of the era. It can be said that, at least for the majority of the population, the local government system hasn't fulfilled the expectations that had existed at the beginning.
- (b) At the same time—in terms of their public acceptance and esteem—local governments have been performing quite well compared to other state institutions, (e.g. the central government). However, apart from the smaller communities the relatively favorable attitude towards local government can be attributed not only to its real performance, but to a large extent also to the lack of information and disinterest, and to the perceived irrelevance of local politics.
- (c) We mentioned earlier that an important factor shaping initial attitudes was the expectation that the new local government system would replace the “unequal” and “centralist” network of inter-settlement relationships with a more “just” and “democratic” pattern of relations. In the mirror of public opinion, this expectation had turned out to be delusive by 2000. Citizens of smaller villages who initially had the most favorable attitudes now exhibited the lowest evaluation.
- (d) Another main tendency is the polarization of the society into socioeconomic “winners” and “losers”. Citizens with different personal characteristics (especially different personal income levels), and living in settlements of different types, now evaluate the new local government system substantially more polarized than before. Being a “loser” in this sense is often not a question of relative, but of a more absolute position: substantial groups within the society consider their situation worse now than under the Communist local regime.
- (e) Analysis of voter turnout data reveals that local government elections are rather the “business of the poor”, whereas parliamentary elections are more attractive for the wealthier settlements, (and, quite probably, individuals). This finding, however, needs further elaboration and interpretation.

Ad (a):

From the point of view of the method applied, this sub-section largely relies on a questionnaire item that can be found in both the 1991 and the 2000 surveys, as well as in several city surveys in the period between.⁸ This item asked respondents to compare the present local government system with the former, Communist one, and to rate the difference on a five-grade scale between “1” (“present system is much worse”) and “5” (“present system is much better”); (“3” meant no perceived major difference between the two systems.)

In the paragraphs below, we will denote the variable representing the 1991 opinions with RR–T (Relative Rating—Then), and the variable representing citizens’ opinion in 2000 with RR–N (Relative Rating—Now).

The overall mean RR has fallen from 3.35 to 3.11. In other words, the proportion of those who think the present local government system is (more or less) worse than under Communism rose from 11% to 23%. Meanwhile, the proportion of those who think that the present system is no better than the previous one rose from 56% to 64%. The table below summarizes the RR–N answers (for the distribution of RR–T, see the relevant table in the previous sub-section).

Table 3.3
**Citizens’ Assessments of Present Versus Communist Local Government Systems
in 1991 and in 2000**

Answer	1991		2000	
	[%]	Cumul. [%]	[%]	Cumul. [%]
Much worse (1)	4.3	4.3	10.1	10.1
Worse (2)	6.4	10.7	13.3	23.4
Same (3)	45.3	56.0	40.3	63.8
Better (4)	38.1	94.0	28.0	91.8
Much better (5)	6.0	100.0	8.2	100.0
No answer: ⁹	10.3		14.9	

SOURCE: Calculated from Medián (1991) and Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

If those who, due to their age, cannot have first-hand experience regarding the Communist era are omitted from the calculation of RR–N, this pattern of change becomes a little more pronounced: RR–N decreases to 3.07 and the proportion of “much worse” or “worse” answers rises to 25% (Variance increases slightly, too.)

Nevertheless, the marked drop in public esteem towards local governments has to be seen in the wider context of public attitudes towards the changing role and perceived functional quality of the entire state sector, (i.e., central government, parliament, and various state institutions like the police, institutional actors in the privatization process, etc.). Such considerations would extend far beyond the limits of this paper (and probably also beyond the limits imposed by current data availability) to compare the public’s assessments of these institutional players. In the next subsection, we will explore some limited aspects of this field.

Ad (b):

In this point, we first argue that from the outset, there has been an apparently clear pattern of expressed preference towards local government and decentralization in general. Then we present some evidence supporting our hypothesis that the public's apparent preference towards decentralization and local governance is in part spurious, and might be also due to limited information on, and public interest in, local politics.

An often used and obvious basis for judging public attitudes towards local governments is to compare them with attitudes towards central government. Since the 1991 questionnaire doesn't contain any items regarding the evaluation of central government, there is no direct empirical evidence available to support the thesis that, at least in this regard, local governments were already being perceived more favorably in 1990–1991.

Nevertheless, this is reassured by several pieces of evidence. The Medián (1992) survey contained an item asking citizens to evaluate “how things are run” in the city and in the country on a 100–point scale (0=worst, 100=best; no reference to the past era was made). The survey found that the average rating in the seven largest cities (except for Budapest) was significantly higher for the “city” than for the “country” (39 and 25 points, respectively; see Medián 1993, p. 9). In the previous year (1991) the same question was asked from citizens of Budapest. The result was 31 points for the district local government, 28 for the Budapest local government, and 26 points for the country [Medián 1993, p. 8]. Finally, the Jelenkutató (1995–1998) city surveys revealed a similar pattern [Kiss, Kabai, Dénes, 2001].

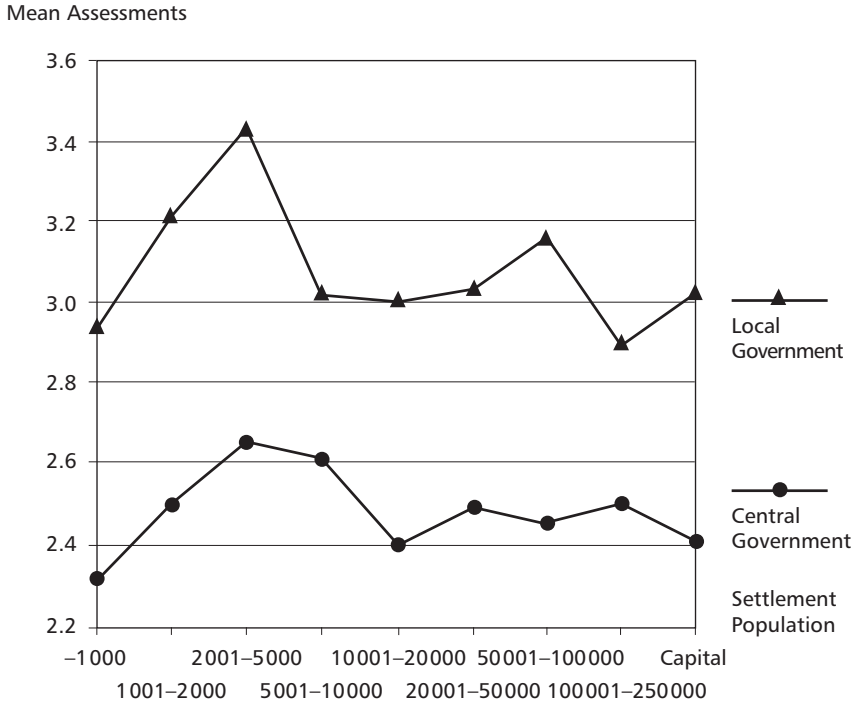
As to the present-time assessment of local government vis-à-vis other state institutions, we present three pieces of information.

At the end of the 1990–2000 period (although not in a directly comparable format), respondents to the Jelenkutató (2000) survey were asked to evaluate not only local, but central government, too. The average rating given for the central government was 2.52—about 0.5 points lower than the average rating for local government. We should note, however, that differences in the structure and wording of the two questionnaire items do allow for direct comparison between them.

The distributions of public opinions on central government and on local governments along the dimension of settlement are plotted on Figure 3.3.

It is surprising that per capita income of households does not notably effect the evaluation of central government performance, even if analyzed simultaneously with settlement size (and opposed to the RR–N measure, which has a significantly negative relationship with personal income). This might signify that the assessment of central government performance is more a question of political-ideological factors (as opposed to material self-interest) than that of local government performance.¹⁰

Figure 3.3
Citizens' Assessment of Local and Central Government
in Different Settlement Size Categories
 (2000; Limited Comparability of Absolute Values; Measured on a Five-point Scale.
 "1" = lowest and "5" = highest evaluation)



SOURCE: Calculated from Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

The Central European Opinion Research Group (CEORG) also surveyed citizens' trust in various public institutions in the framework of a three-country comparative study.¹¹ Out of 15 various public institutions, local governments were rated in fifth place (By way of comparison: in the Czech Republic local governments were rated in second place, with Poland in eighth place).

Finally, a narrower basis of comparison is citizens' assessments of the extent to which corruption penetrates various central and local government institutions. In this regard, local governments present surprisingly good results. A public opinion survey conducted in 2000 [Gallup, 2000] asked respondents to specify how frequently they think corruption is present in various public institutions (central and local government organs, health care institutions, law enforcement agencies, etc.). Local government departments were highly valued in this regard. Out of 30 or so

items, all eight local governmental units/departments were rated among the 13 least corrupted organizations. The first three places were occupied by Client Service (3.), Education (2.), and the “others” (1.) sections of local governments.

In summation, it is reasonable to think that the relative preference for local vs. central government (and to a lesser extent, also compared to other public institutions) has been the norm for Hungarian citizens since the beginning of the era. The steady popularity of local government has been—and, to a lesser extent, still is—an often-debated issue in the Hungarian scientific community. It has frequently been attributed, for example, to the relative lack of party politics in local political life. Indeed, throughout the entire period there has been:

- (i) a strong, positive correlation between settlement size and the presence of party politics (as measured by, for example, the proportion of party politicians in the local council), and,
- (ii) a strong negative relationship between settlement size and the popularity of local government

Although there are strong counter-arguments against the above explanation of why decentralization is preferred by many citizens [for more in-depth discussion, see Gajduschek 1991 and Horváth 1996], it is not our intention here to decide to what extent the above explanation is well grounded. Instead, we question—or, at least, re-interpret—the finding itself, while trying to explain it.

Our third proposition regarding initial public attitudes towards local government—apart from the settlements below a population of about 5 000–10 000—is that their relatively favorable perception can be attributed more to a lack of information, general apathy, and to the perceived irrelevance of local politics, than to well-informed consideration and judgement.

However, there are several important pieces of empirical evidence that shed a different light on the findings presented in the above paragraphs. First, voter turnout in local elections has been systematically and substantially lower than in parliamentary elections (t-test sig<0.0005).

This is true in all three election years (1990, 1994, and 1998), and within each population category (one minor exception is the 1998 parliamentary elections, which were characterized by unusually low turnout. At this “pair” of elections, voter turnout in settlements below 2000 inhabitants was somewhat lower than in the local elections):¹²

Table 3.4
Voter Turnout at Local Government and Parliamentary Elections, 1990–1998

Type of Election	1990	1994	1998
Parliamentary (1 st round)	65.1%	68.9%	57.0%
Local government (1 st round in 1990)	40.2%	43.4%	45.7%

SOURCE: Calculated from Office of Elections data

Second, the patterns of local government election turnout contradicts the “small is beautiful” hypothesis stating that citizens prefer smaller and/or lower level local governmental units, since these are closer to them [e.g. Bóhm, 1999].

There is, however, some apparent evidence supporting the “small is beautiful” thesis: there is a significant negative correlation between settlement size and turnout in local elections throughout the nineties (linear correlation coefficients in 1990, 1994, and 1998 are between -0.13 and -0.2 , $\text{sig} < 0.0005$). Of course, if citizens feel local politics more important in smaller settlements than in larger ones, that could mean that they are in favor of decentralization.

However, this seemingly straightforward relationship runs contrary to itself if one takes into account the effect of personal income. The partial correlation coefficients between size and turnout (taking into account the effect of personal income of local citizens) is between $+0.22$ and $+0.23$ for the three elections. (Not surprising stability of this correlation.)

This result not only contradicts an important argument supporting preferences for decentralization, but also suggests that even the opposite might be true – at least under current circumstances and modes of operation.

There is a third consideration that might explain the (relative) apathetic attitudes of the public towards local politics. Let’s take a look at voter turnout in Budapest.

We have already mentioned that the capital had—and has—a special status among Hungarian settlements. This privileged status has many dimensions, (e.g. outstanding relative and absolute weight in terms of economic and political influence). The Hungarian capital also has unparalleled access to national media, and thus the “captive” attention of the wider public.

The remarkable pattern in local election turnout data is that voting activity in Budapest runs contrary to the stable, diminishing pattern which can be found elsewhere in Hungary. Voting activity rises from about 30% in the previous settlement category (cities between 100 and 300 thousand) to more than 37% in Budapest. It was not possible to identify any other explanation for this pattern than the higher level of information available for citizens.

This relationship pattern between settlement size and voter turnout, (see Figure 3.2) is consistently and significantly present at all three local governmental elections (1-way ANOVA $\text{sig} < 0.0005$; graphical representations are almost identical). Furthermore, it is surprisingly stable, even if one takes into account such characteristics as the proportion of the elderly, average level of education, average personal income tax bases, or unemployment.

Nor can this be attributed to the fundamentally different perception of the Budapest local government, since its status in the eyes of the public fits into the general pattern which diminishes

as settlement size increases (see above in Figure 3.1). The distribution of these opinions is in many respects similar to those present in the 100 000–300 000-settlement category.

Since there are no other plausible explanations, it seems reasonable to attribute the higher Budapest turnout in local elections to higher overall levels of information. If this is true, however, it follows that in the case of medium sized and larger settlements there is an inherent lack of information which “dooms” those citizens unequipped to follow, and thus forced to be apathetic towards, local politics.

Both growing public apathy towards local political issues and a growing perception of the irrelevance of local politics has led to decreased public attention being paid to local government issues. This view is strongly reassured by opinion polls. Citizens tend to agree—in all settlement size categories—with the following statement: “Local government decisions hardly effect the lives of people like me”. (In the entire population, 30% agreed fully, and another 44% partially). Since the most important public goods (schooling, medical services, social care, public transport, local infrastructure, etc.) are overwhelmingly provided by local governments, the prevalence of this view can only (or mainly) be attributed to a lack of sufficient information. These findings give some support for our hypothesis that the relatively favorable evaluation of local governments can be attributed - maybe to a large extent—more to disinterest and the “relative lack of scandals” (at least the lack of those known by the public), than to informed judgement.

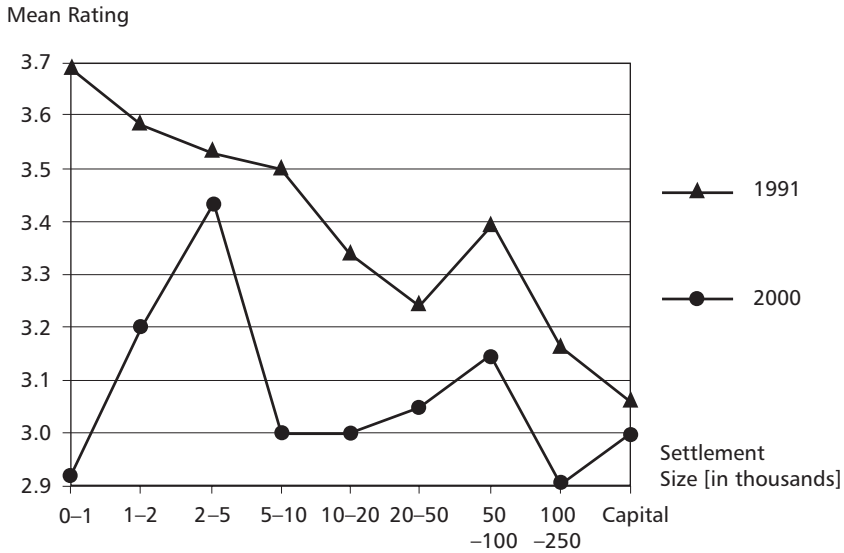
Ad (c):

There is one more—quite instructive—characteristic typical of many respondents that can be used to detect changes between 1991 and 2000. The attentive reader will remember that a few pages above, we identified settlement size as the only dimension along which significant variance in RR–T could be detected in 1991.¹³ The significance of the relationship remained significant (ANOVA sig <0.0005). However, its more-or-less linear, downward-sloping pattern has changed quite significantly.

It can be seen that between 1991 and 2000, mean RR has dropped in each settlement size category. However, the most remarkable change can be found at the settlements of below 2 000 inhabitants. This is understandable if we consider the situation of these settlements—being quite unfavorable both in absolute and in relative terms (related to either *ex ante* expectations, or other settlement size categories).¹⁴ Apparently, blame for the unfulfilled expectations of smaller-village citizens is routinely placed on the central government, too.

We noted earlier that the main legitimizing feature of the new local government system—apart from its democratic character, the effect of which we couldn’t test directly—was the belief in its potential to promote “inter-settlement equity”. This would, according to these expectations, emancipate the smaller villages, whose interests were perceived by many to have been suppressed by other policy actors. (The usual culprits were seen as the neighboring administrative center townships during the entire 70’s and 80’s.)

Figure 3.4
Citizens' Assessments of the New Versus the Communist Local Government System
in Various Settlement Size Categories in 1991 and in 2000
 (1= "much worse", 3= "same", 5= "much better")



SOURCE: Calculated from Medián (1991) and Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

The practicality of this idea, and the viability of hundreds of local governments with quite a broad range of responsibilities, (but having only a few dozen or, at most, 100–200 citizens), has been regularly questioned since the beginning of the 90s—mainly on the basis of economy-of-scale arguments. In spite of this, no attempt has been made to alter the status quo, which is due to legal-institutional barriers (the Act on Local Governments can be modified only by a qualified, two-third majority), to the “legitimacy factor” mentioned aboveand, and probably, to other factors.

It is no surprise that these smaller local communities – most of which are located in economically stagnating regions usually having unfavorable social and demographic characteristics—would need an amount of money far beyond their own economic capacity to perform a minimal amount of local government tasks. However, “economic rationality”—namely, economies of scale—is not a philosophy that favors the running of self-contained, independent public services providing organizations for tasks like schooling, infrastructure, administrative services etc. for 50 or 200 people. However, political rationality could, in theory, lead to economically “irrational” solutions.

(Although in this case, even the existence of such political rationality seems questionable, since only 14% of the population live in settlements of less than 2 000).

Nonetheless, in an era of sharp declines in national government spending, constant and often quite drastic drops in state fiscal redistribution are now a fact of life. It would be increasingly unrealistic to expect the central government to “pay the bill” for so much far-reaching local government legislation.¹⁵ The above opinion data reflect these somewhat illusive considerations; citizens of small villages have gone from “heaven to hell”, at least in terms of their attitudes towards local governments.

Ad (d):

Also peculiar is the fact that—in sharp contrast to the 1991 situation—opinions have become polarized across almost all dimensions representing social, demographic, and settlement characteristics. Maybe the most telling dimensions are the following (all of which were entirely insignificant in 1991, but had become highly significant by 2000):

- Educational level: the higher the education, the more favorable the RR–N (ANOVA sig<0.0005, monotonous relationship).
- Per capita income of household: the higher the income, the more favorable the RR–N. The lowest two quintiles have RR–N values below 3.0 (one-tailed sig. of positive correlation = 0.026).
- Age: the age category between 18–29 scores the highest. The others have more or less the same RR–N values (ANOVA sig=0.014; only categorical age data was available). This relationship becomes insignificant if we omit respondents under 30, (i.e., those who have no personal experience on which they could base their judgement.) Nevertheless, throughout the text we will not exclude this age category if otherwise not indicated.
- If the effects of income and education are analyzed simultaneously, education becomes insignificant. But the nature and significance level of the influence of per capita income remains unaltered (ANCOVA sig=0.023).

In summation, we can say that the most important personal characteristics, (at least among those explored here), influencing perception of local government is per capita income. Furthermore, the poorest quintile is definitely worse off than under the previous local government system: their RR–N is 2.85, which decreases to 2.78 if respondents under 29 are excluded. The second and third quintile are exactly indifferent (RR–N=3.0). Finally, the fourth and fifth income quintile score 3.1 and 3.2 on average. (Above, we mentioned that mean RR–T for the entire population was 3.35, and that it was homogenous across different income groups).

The perceptions of the public, especially as opposed to the uncertain expectations and skepticism beforehand, reflect and reinforce the “social reality” that was identified by other studies using “hard” indicators¹⁶, or that can be hypothesized by using informed judgement. This reflection:

- has, first of all, become much more determined by material conditions of individuals (as opposed to other, more “value-laden” determinants), and,
- is much more differentiated than the *ex ante* assertions of the public, which testifies to the presence of a substantial (and hard-won) learning process—or disillusion—among the citizens.

Of course, citizens’ perceptions of how the present local government system compares with the Communist one depends on the substantial and deep-lying effect of citizens’ general attitudes towards the entirety of the Communist social, political and economic system and towards the great transformation culminating in 1989-90. A 1998 questionnaire survey of the adult citizens of Hungary, which asked the straightforward question “to what extent do you agree with the statement that the (1989–90) changes do more harm than good for the country?”, reinforces our above findings at several points [Gradwohl, Marián, Szabó, 1998, pp. 10–11].

Measured on a 100-point scale (0=“totally disagree”, 100=“totally agree”), it was only the 18–29 age group that disagreed (mean score: 41; mean scores of older groups vary between 51 and 55). Similarly, those perceiving their financial situation as much worse or worse than the average tend to agree with the above statement (62 and 53 points, respectively). This might suggest that the seeming failure of the Hungarian local government system is not (or not only) attributable to its real performance in the mirror of citizens’ expectations, but rather to citizens’ general attitudes towards the transformation process. It might well be that the blame for the evils experienced by many citizens during the 1990–2000 period is put, in a largely undifferentiated manner, on the local government system, without much reference to its relative merits.

Ad (e):

Probably, it comes as no surprise that voter turnout in various local communities seems highly stable over time. Correlation coefficients between overall (average) voter turnout in Hungarian settlements at subsequent elections vary between 0.7 and 0.8 in the case of local government elections, and between 0.74 and 0.81 in the case of parliamentary elections (all correlations are significant at the $p < 0.0005$ level. Observations are weighted by the number of citizens having the right to vote).

More surprising is the strong and consistent relationship between average personal income (the “wealth” of the settlement as measured by average personal income tax base) and turnout. Namely:

- the positive relationship between average personal income and turnout at parliamentary elections, and
- the negative relationship between average personal income and turnout at local elections.

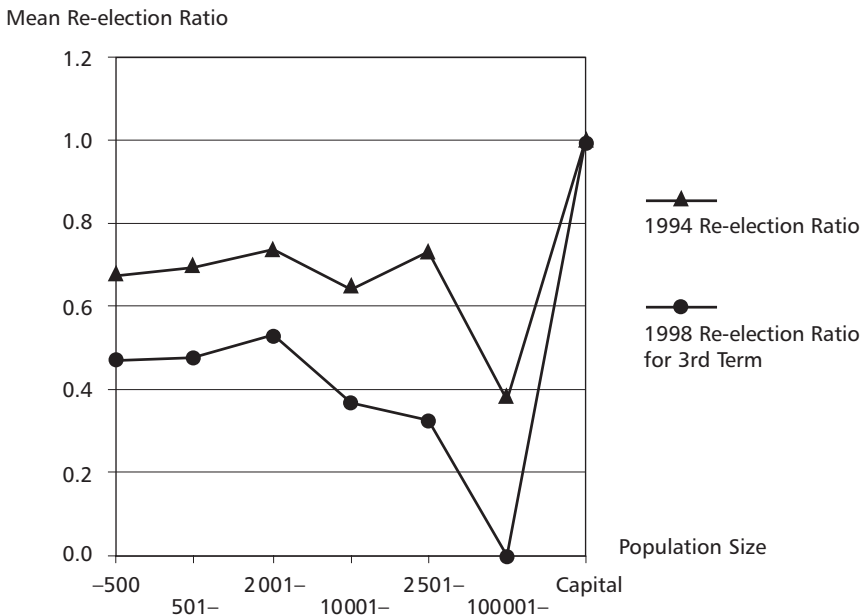
Bivariate correlations between average personal income and local election turnout in the three subsequent election years are between -0.37 and -0.48 ; while between $+0.061$ and $+0.66$ in the case of parliamentary elections. (Each coefficient is significant at the $p < 0.0005$ level; observations

are weighted by the number of citizens having the right to vote). The strength and nature of this relationship doesn't practically change, even if settlement size is taken into account.

Thus, it seems that local government elections are more important to lower income settlements, whereas the opposite is true for parliamentary elections—not in absolute, but in relative terms. When interpreting this result, it is necessary to keep in mind that, in absolute terms, parliamentary turnout was consistently and substantially higher than local turnouts in all three election years, and in each settlement size category (with some minor exceptions).

Finally, the re-election ratio of mayors—which is provided only for illustrative purposes—suggests that excessive turbulence in local politics is more the exception than the rule. In 1994, 69% of mayors were re-elected, and in 1998 another 69% of those already returned at the previous elections were re-elected for a third term (Thus, in the 1998–2002 election period, 48% of all mayors are in office for a third term). The distribution of re-elections across various settlement size categories fits into what one would expect: the larger the settlement, the less probable that the mayor was re-elected for a third term (see below figure; ANOVA sig<0.0005):

Figure 3.5
Mayors' Re-election Ratio in Different Population Size Categories in 1994 and 1998
(1998 Data Refer Only to Those Mayors Re-elected
for Their Third Consecutive Terms)



SOURCE: Calculated from Office of Elections data

The “hard” measure of re-election is consistent with the RR–N measure: mean RR–N is 3.08 at those communities where the mayor was not elected for the third term and 3.17 in those settlements where the mayor was re-elected (t-test sig<0.0005).

2.3 Some Additional Features of Present Public Perception of Local Governments

Up until now, analysis or direct opinion measurements were restricted to the comparison of the local government system with the local administrative system of the Communist era. An important reason for using this measure, besides its relevance, was that there was no better one available to us. It has many advantages, but some deficiencies, too. Maybe the largest problem is that it confounds two, theoretically distinct factors: the evaluation of the present system (in any absolute sense), and the evaluation of the past system (in any absolute sense). It might be argued that the local government system (or anything else) of a given time can’t be judged in any other way than by comparing it to something else, (e.g. a previous, comparable reference point). Still, in order to offer some new insights first (a) we briefly outline a somewhat simplistic alternative, “absolute” measure of general citizen satisfaction with local government. Then (b) we give a brief description and analysis of opinions regarding various fields of local government responsibility.

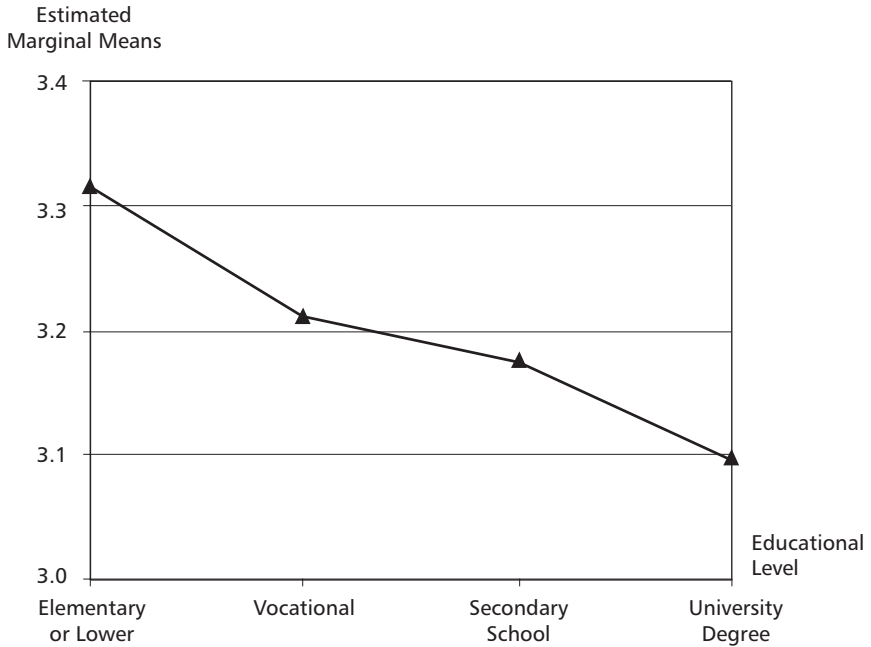
Ad (a):

The alternative measure of general citizen satisfaction (hereinafter: MCS) is calculated as a (weighted) average of valuations given for various fields of local government responsibility. The fields are as follows: schooling, medical services, cultural services, social care (including both in-kind and financial benefits), public safety, and the environment (i.e., air, drinking water, waste collection, conditions of streets, etc.). The mean value of MCS is 3.23 for the entire population (as opposed to the RR–N average of 3.11). Relationships between MCS and settlement size are of similar nature and strength, as in the case of RR–N (see Figure 4). The main difference is that the smallest villages score somewhat higher in the MCS dimension.

There is, however, an important difference between the relationships of the two indicators with such personal characteristics as personal income and educational levels. We mentioned above that, in simultaneously analyzing the effects of these two characteristics on RR–N, personal income is positive and significant, while educational level is insignificant. In other words, the most determining personal characteristics influencing citizen attitudes as measured by RR–N is per capita household income.

If we look at this attitude as measured by MCS, however, we find that educational level is at least as important a determinant than personal income is (ANCOVA sig=0.001 for the educational level variable; see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6
Citizens' Assessment of Present Local Government System (MCS: Measure of Citizen Satisfaction) at Different Educational Levels of Respondents (2000)
 (rated on a 5-point scale where "1" stands for the lowest and "5" for the highest evaluation)



SOURCE: Calculated from Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

This supports the hypothesis that (a) the "RR" indicators have a certain "ideological", or value-laden character, and that (b) this "ideological" orientation of citizens is strongly influenced by personal income (as opposed to other dimensions of social status, such as educational level).

Ad (b):

The Jelenkutató (2000) survey asked respondents to evaluate the performance of their local government in the fields of the most important public services provided by the local government, namely:

- schooling;
- medical services;
- cultural services/amusement possibilities;

- social care (various types of pensions and most of the unemployment services are not included here, since they belong to central authorities’ field of responsibility), and,
- quality of the environment.

The following table summarizes the mean scores for each of these dimensions of citizen satisfaction. Furthermore, it informs about the effects of (i) settlement size, (ii) respondent’s educational level, and (iii) per capita income of the respondent households, which is said to be negative/positive if the correlation coefficient is negative/positive, respectively. (These three explanatory variables were analyzed simultaneously; only relationships significant at least at the 0.01 level are included. *Strong relationships—those with large differences in the dependent variable—are marked with an exclamation sign “!”.*)

Table 3.5
Patterns and Main Determinants of Citizens’ Evaluation of Local Governmental Performance in Various Fields of Public Services (2000)
 (rated on a 5-point scale where “1” stands for the lowest and “5” for the highest evaluation)

Services	Avg.	Explanatory Variables			Comments (interaction effects)
		Settlement Size	Personal Income	Educational Level	
Schooling	3.75	Low below 1000!	positive	Lowest at university level	Esp. low at the 1 st income quartile in large cities
Medical services	3.51	Highest between 2 000–10 000!		Highest with primary school education	
Social care	3.00	Highest between 2 000–10 000			
Public safety	3.01	Negative!			
Culture, entertainment	2.96	Positive! (in Budapest and other large cities)	Positive!	Negative	
Environmental quality	3.00	Negative!		Negative	

SOURCE: Calculated from Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

It is interesting that—if we control the effect of the other two variables—in most cases it is the settlements with populations between 2 000 and 10 000, which are valued the highest (exceptions are culture—where the best-performing settlement category, surprisingly, is between 50 000 and 100 000 residents- and environmental quality, where the smallest villages perform the best).

3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS AND POPULAR FEELING: HAS THE PUBLIC SHAPED THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Maybe this issue poses the largest methodological difficulties in this study. To mention only a few:

Among those innumerable factors that influence public policy and law formulation—even in an (in the Weberian sense) “ideal-typical world”—what kind of an effect would one consider as specifically originating from “public perception”? Elected representative bodies, especially the parliament, represent, (at least in principal), the will and the “perceptions” of the public. In this sense, all parliamentary acts *per definitionem* are the expressions of “popular will”. The other standard vehicles for influencing public opinion include mass media, political parties, political interest groups and NGOs, popular initiatives, civil disobedience movements, street demonstrations, forceful street riots, etc.—all of which could be interpreted as channels, through which “public perceptions” can be incorporated into the policy process.

Even if we had an acceptable definition of exactly what in the policy process constitutes the influence of the public—and even if such factors were present at some important policy decisions—it is difficult if not impossible to test hypotheses regarding the presence of a casual relationship between the “public influence” factor and the actual policy outcome—at least in a positivist-quantitative methodological framework.

Apparently, the theoretical and methodological difficulties are numerous. However, we are in a much more advantageous situation with regards to practical—although admittedly more “intuitive/qualitative”—answers to the question posed in the section’s title. Our main proposition is that—apart from certain exceptions of modest importance we shall discuss later—the initial formulation and the subsequent development of the Hungarian local government system has been, and is, largely a bargaining area between certain interest groups within the elite. The public generally has had neither the opportunity nor the motivation to influence those bargains. It follows from the above that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to “prove” (or “falsify”) such a statement in an empirical-positivistic manner. Consequently, a different approach to the section’s subject field is needed.

Below, we give a brief historical account of the birth and subsequent development of the local government system from the point of view of the public's influence exercised upon it.

The constitutional-legal foundation of the local government system of the 90s was adopted in the summer of 1990, and remained fundamentally unaltered throughout the decade. The cornerstone of the system has been the Law on Local Governments, (LXV/1990). Preparatory work on the draft law had already begun about five years earlier as part of the converging reform efforts of the Communist "council" administrative apparatus, the reformist forces in the center, and external players fostering the decentralization and democratization of local-territorial governance such as the IMF and the Council of Europe [Bóhm, 1990. pp. 12–13]. By the time of the Spring 1990 parliamentary elections, it was practically ready for adoption.

Up until this point, due to the routine working of policy and law formulation of the era, the general public had essentially neither been informed of, nor incorporated into the process. A decisive moment in the initial development of the multi-party, parliamentary system was the "pact" between the winner of the elections, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), and the largest opposition party, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). From our current point of view, one of its most important consequences was that—along with many other essential fields—legal regulations on local governments remained modifiable only by a qualified (i.e., two-thirds) majority. Soon after the pact, however, the parliament became an arena of excessive and often parochial coalition-opposition debates. This was regarded with dislike and disillusionment by both the media and the general public. The Law on Local Governments was adopted amidst such fierce parliamentary debates. It is characteristic that a central issue of the debate was the extent, to which party politics should enjoy preference in local governmental elections¹⁷—an issue largely unaddressed by the "ordinary citizen" confronting drastically deteriorating living standards and local public service provisions.

It should be clear from the above that the entire process of formulating and adopting the single most important element of the new local governmental system largely failed in the objective of either informing or incorporating wider societal actors into the policy process. There is only one point where some kind of an exception to this rule could be identified. (Although to our knowledge, no public opinion survey had taken place on the "expert" level—which was of decisive importance—a certain consensus was evident regarding the existence of a definite popular demand for ending the excessive centralism and perceived egoistic despotism of the county-level administrative tier and the "more powerful" settlements.) The large measure of segmentation of local governments, which we have already referred to, reflects this feature of the new system.

As we noted earlier, this presumption was *ex post* reassured to some extent by the Medián (1991) survey. This found that citizens of settlements below 10 000 rated the new local government system as above average. However, it is questionable (i) that this larger popularity can be attributed

to the above factor in its entirety, and (ii) that the actual policy outcome can be attributed to any “general will” of smaller settlements (even if it did exist).

Subsequent modifications of the local governmental system include:

- (a) Changes in the electoral system (1994): one-round elections, direct election of mayors in settlements of above 10 000 citizens, etc.
- (b) The subsequent changes in the proportion of personal income tax that is given to the respective local governments (this proportion has decreased gradually from 100% in 1990 to practically five percent in 2000).

In both cases, the level of technicality of (proposed) changes, the resulting difficulty in assessing its consequences, a lack of information, and—possibly—conscious efforts of the governing forces hindered the wider public to take a position in, and influence, the policy process.

In summation, with a few exceptions, central government policies on local governments have not received the involvement and influence of the wider public to a large extent.

4. LEARNING ABOUT THE PREFERENCES OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC

There was only a limited basis of quantitative information available to us which might have allowed for the assessment of how much local decision makers “try to learn” about the preferences of the local public. Furthermore, it is not only the relative lack of data, but also the more theoretical problem of conceptualizing—and making workable—these attempts at learning that caused such difficulty.

As a result, our analysis of how and to what extent decision makers learn about local preferences had to rely on qualitative as much as on quantitative evidence and considerations. Our (mainly tentative) conclusions are as follows:

- (a) The overall citizen assessment of the public’s ability to influence local politics was consistently low throughout the 90s. Although longitudinal changes in opinions cannot be tested due to limited data, it seems probable that the public’s opinion in this regard has not improved (or maybe has even worsened) since the beginning of the 90s.
- (b) An important and stable factor influencing public views of their own political influence is settlement size. The general pattern in this regard has been relatively consistent and stable over time. Namely; the larger the settlement, the lower the possibility of “ordinary people’s” preferences being channeled into the local policy process. Another, even more important determinant seems to be the amount of institutional (i.e., social, educational, medical, and

other infrastructural) assets inherited from the past as a result of unequal access to development opportunities under the Communist regime. However, this explanation needs further empirical support not possible within the limits of the current analysis.

- (c) Personal characteristics, such as per capita income of household and educational levels, also influence assessments of citizen influence. The recurring pattern can be observed here again that “value-laden” determinants (represented by such indicators as education) tend to be suppressed by more “material” ones, such as household income.

With regards to quantitative analysis, the following measures were chosen:

- For the purpose of (limited) longitudinal analysis, we selected one item from both the Medián (1991) and the Jelenkutató (2000) questionnaire. These two items, although unfortunately not in a directly comparable manner, ask respondents to assess the influence of the “common people” on local decision making.¹⁸
- For analyzing present-time patterns, an additional measure was used: the direct assessment of respondents in the 2000 survey on the extent to which local decision-makers are aware of the preferences of local citizens. (Thus, this measure reflects more directly the cognitive aspect of “learning” public preferences).

Ad (a):

The average score given to citizens’ possibilities to have a voice in local matters was 3.5 in 1991 and 2.5 in 2000. To put it somewhat differently:

- In 1991, 63% of respondents “fully agreed” with the statement that “people like me have little influence on local decisions”, while
- In 2000, 70% of respondents felt that citizens’ interests and preferences are taken into account by local government only “a little bit” (49%), or “not at all” (21%).

As we noted earlier, the different wording of the two questionnaire items make direct comparisons between the two measures very problematic. However, the difference seems to be large enough and, in accordance with our findings presented in the previous chapter, seems to take the risk of saying that the overall assessment of the citizens became more unfavorable during the 90s.

As to the present situation, this point can be illustrated by data in the table below. In a 1997 survey of citizens of about 20 Hungarian towns and cities, participants were asked to rate the influence of various policy actors on local decision making (100-point scale, “0”=no influence, “100”=very large influence)¹⁹. In another survey (PMO 2000), chief officers of Hungarian local government offices were asked to do the same. The results of the two surveys are listed in the table below. In the rightmost column, we indicated the direction of trends running contrary to the 1997 citizen answers (“~” stands for no substantial difference). (However, in interpreting these results, one has to keep in mind that chief officers seemed to use a somewhat different scale; their mean ratings were altogether seven points lower than those of citizens.)

Table 3.6
Citizens' (1997) and Local Government Chief Officers' Assessments of the Influence of Various Policy Actors on Local Decision Making (100-point scale, 2000)

Citizens of Towns, 1997		Chief Officers of Local Governments, 2000	
Policy Actor	Mean Score	Policy Actor (if wording not same)	Mean Score
Mayor	85		86 (-)
Council	81		93 (I)
Officials of the Mayor's Office	67	Managers of the Mayor's Office	67 (-)
Local party organizations	57		42 (↓)
Local entrepreneurs	57		38 (↓)
Government	53	Ministries	32 (↓)
NGOs ("társadalmi szervezetek")	51	Local associations Organizations of ethnic minorities	38 (↓) 24
Parliament	51		N.A.
Local citizens	47		48 (-)
Various churches	45		N.A.

SOURCE: Kiss, Kabai, Dénes (2001) and calculations based on PMO (2000) survey data

Citizens of towns assess their influence quite pessimistically; they perceive themselves as the second least-important actors. Chief officers give a similarly low rating for citizens in absolute terms. But they tend to attribute even less importance to other possible actors (i.e., to local entrepreneurs, party organizations, and NGOs).

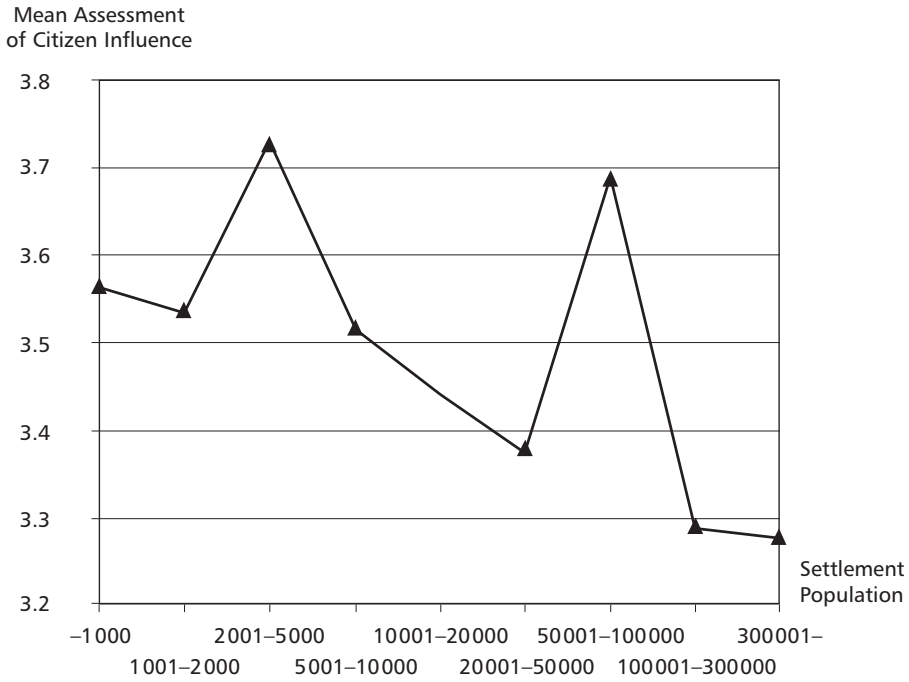
Ad (b):

If we examine the evaluation of citizens' capacity to influence local government decisions in settlements of various size cohorts we find:

- (i) a general pattern that the bigger the settlement, the lower citizen's overall influence (except Budapest in the year 2000, where a certain increase could be observed), but,
- (ii) we also find a characteristic and consistent pattern that in both years the scores of settlements between 2 000–5 000, and between 50 000–100 000 stand out of the otherwise diminishing pattern. The following two figures (Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8) summarize the relationship between settlement size and the assessment of citizen influence in local government decisions (ANOVA significance levels are below 0.001):

Figure 3.7

Citizens' Assessment of Citizens' Capacity to Influence Local Decisions in Various Settlement Size Categories, Compared to the Situation Two Years Earlier (1991) (5-point scale, "1" = much smaller, "3" = the same, "5" = much larger than before)



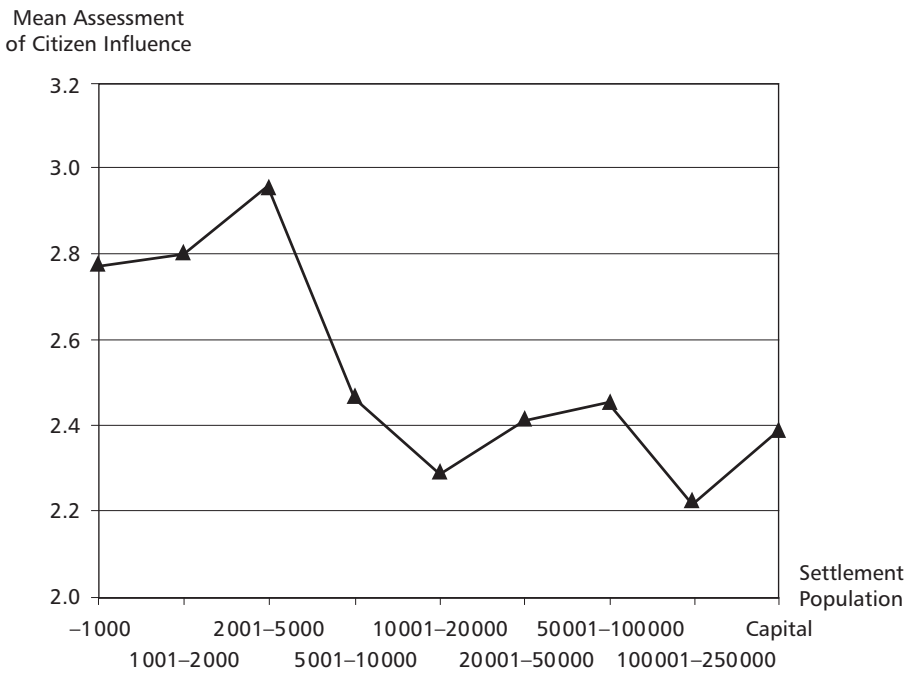
SOURCE: Calculated from Medián (1991) survey data

The explanation of this very characteristic phenomenon is not straightforward. It seems, however, plausible that it is these two clusters of settlements that have inherited the most financial and related resources from the Communist era. These resources originate—as we noted earlier—in the characteristically unequal pattern of settlements' access to various (mainly central government) developmental resources during the 70s and 80s. First, centers of sub-regions (corresponding to the 2 000–10 000 category) and, second, larger towns, many of which were chief towns of a county, enjoyed a relatively advantageous position in the bargaining processes.

These two groups of settlements were to some extent able to transform their previous advantages that existed before 1990 into a continually favorable situation. Here, we primarily think of such long-run investments into social infrastructure as local schools, kindergartens, facilities for social services, medical care, culture, etc. But due to acute resource scarcity in most parts of the country,

no new investments into such social infrastructure were made during the 90s, and in many cases even the preservation of the previously accepted standards has been unrealistic. This is why the importance of previously accumulated “institutional wealth” is so high.

Figure 3.8
Citizens’ Assessment of the Extent to which Citizens’ Preferences are Taken into Account in Local Decisions in Various Settlement Size Categories (2000)
 (5-point scale, “1” = not at all, “5” = definitely yes.)



SOURCE: Calculated from Jelenkutató (2000) survey data

Another factor that proved beneficial to cities with county rights (approximately corresponding to settlements with populations of over 50 000) was that in the new local government system, they got out from beneath the control of county authorities. This meant that they could dispose of financial resources available to them more autonomously and “selfishly”. The larger concentration of financial resources in these settlements, in turn, has led to a feeling among citizens of being better served.

The 100 000–300 000 population size category, which contains eight cities, has been severely hit by the spasmodic economic restructuring of the first half of the 90s, especially the breakdown of state-owned heavy manufacturing and other industrial sectors. (Urban problems typical in large agglomerations also effected this category.)

Comparing Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8, it can also be seen that the overall effect of this “accumulated institutional wealth” variable, in accordance with what one would intuitively expect, diminishes over time.

Ad (c):

It is interesting to take a look at the personal determinants of assessments of citizen influence. We examined and compared the effects of two explanatory variables on respondents’ opinions: per capita household income, and the educational levels of respondents. The characteristic pattern to be observed here is that in 1991, educational level—considered here to represent cultural and value-laden factors—was definitely a more important determinant of the “influence” variable than personal income. But by 2000, this pattern had largely reversed itself. Namely, during the 1991–2000 period, personal income became an influential determinant of individual opinions, meanwhile education has become insignificant.

Our interpretation of this finding is in accordance with the trend we identified in this chapter before with regards to overall assessments of local government. There we concluded that, first of all, individual income is becoming an increasingly important factor in determining what people think of local governments. (With a grain of cynicism, we could add that it is becoming an ever-increasingly important factor in determining what people think not only of local governments, but also of virtually anything.)

In the present context of analyzing citizens’ assessments of civic influence on local government policies, this comes down to the interpretation that, during the course of the decade, factors of material, day-to-day “survival” have definitely come to the foreground. These now overshadow the previous effects of any ideological presuppositions and value-laden belief systems of citizens. In 1991, the characteristic pattern was that the higher the educational level, the lower the assessment of citizen influence. In 2000, this turned to the pattern that the higher the individual income, the higher the assessment of citizen influence.

Summarizing the findings in the previous and current sub-sections, we could say that higher personal income has assumed more and more the function of “rose-colored spectacles”: a filter through which things (or, at least, the central dependent variables of this study) are perceived significantly more favorably than otherwise.

We tested the above hypotheses using ANCOVA; we controlled for the effect of settlement size (categorical independent variables: settlement size category and educational level, covariate: per capita household income). Significance levels in 1991 were $p=0.09$ for income and $p<0.0005$

for educational level; however, in 2000 they became $p=0.001$ for income and $p=0.75$ for educational level.

In addition to the above “influence” variable, the Jelenkutató (2000) survey included another questionnaire item that is more directly tied to the concept of decision makers “trying to learn” about local preferences. Respondents were asked to give a rating between “1” (“not at all”) and “5” (“absolutely”) to the following question: “How much do you think the local government knows what local citizens prefer?”²⁰. The average score was 3.0—half a point higher than the “influence” score.

The question might be asked as to whether respondents can differentiate between the former measure (“local preferences are taken into account”) and the latter one (“local preferences are known to the decision makers”). Regardless, there is certainly a strong positive correlation (0.58) between the two measures ($\text{sig}<0.0005$). Furthermore, its relationships with such explanatory variables as settlement size are practically identical with those outlined in the previous paragraphs. In sum, our previous conclusions regarding the “citizens’ influence” variable seem to be extendable to this more direct measure of “trying to learn about public preferences”.

5. CHANNELS OF CITIZEN-TO-COUNCIL INFORMATION FLOW

In this section, we will describe and, as far as possible, evaluate the various techniques used in getting to know the preferences of the local public. These techniques can be grouped into two clusters. The first, smaller, (and perhaps less practically significant), cluster includes the more formal and rigorous techniques of political feedback defined and, in some cases, required by law. The second, larger group contains all the more informal, loose and mixed techniques that are in, more or less, frequent use.

Questions posed in this section offer less space for interpretation and hypothesis testing, and require mostly descriptive analysis. Thus, at this point we are going to be more “moderate” in drawing conclusions and leave the reader the task of interpreting existing evidence to a larger extent. In many cases, no quantitative data appropriate for statistical analysis and for drawing general conclusions were available. (In these cases we relied heavily on a case-based approach.)

Our overall impression - to some extent supported by the mostly case-based evidence presented below, as well as “participatory observation”²¹—is that the existence of a conscious strategy for communicating with the local public is more the exception than the rule among Hungarian local governments. There are probably very few local governments in the country where the

local political elite (or local politicians) could formulate and “run” such a strategy. Furthermore, it seems that the longer-run success and personal commitment of the mayor is a prerequisite for the development of such a strategy.

At the same time, many different channels and technical means are in operation which serve the purpose of learning the will of the public (or some parts of it). New techniques, primarily Internet-based communication forms, have rapidly emerged. These offer a more unrestrained and flexible citizen-local government communication channel indeed. Citizen associations and various other types of NGOs are also utilized to an increasing degree in getting to know the preferences of the public.

The real importance and dynamics of this process, however, can be assessed only very roughly. It seems that certain groups of citizens, (i.e., pressure groups, NGOs, etc.) find their ways into local governmental policy making. But it also seems probable that, due to local power relations, unequal access, and similar factors, the preconditions for a well-functioning pluralist model of local democracy do not exist at the moment.²²

5.1 Techniques Defined by Law

Apart from electing local government representatives and the mayor, the Act on Local Government defines three distinct ways to foster the revealing and expressing of the interests of local government constituencies:²³

- (a) local referenda;
- (b) public hearings, single-issue discussion forums, and,
- (c) popular initiatives.²⁴

5.1.1 Local Referenda

The more important cases, in which a local referendum can, must, or must not be held are as follows. Local referenda:

- Must be held (i) prior to decisions on uniting or separating a settlement; (ii) if a sufficiently large number of citizens express their will to hold one; (iii) to decide whether to join, or to withdraw from, joint local government councils;
- Can be held on any issue in the jurisdiction of the local government council, and
- *Must not* be held on taxation, budgetary, and management (organizational, personal, etc.) issues.

The referendum is effective if more than half of voters give their vote and more than half of the valid votes are given on the same option. Before 1999, no central records of local referenda were kept, which makes data on local referenda in the 1990–98 period unavailable. The statistics of local referenda by issue type for this period (January 1999–September 2000) are as follows:

Table 3.7
Number of Local Referenda by Type of Issue (January 1999–September 2000)

Type of Issue	Number of Local Referenda
High-risk environmental projects (dumps, reduction works, etc.)	11
Uniting/separating settlements	9
Large-scale public investments (usually infrastructural)	14
Other public policy issues of substantial public interest	8
Total	32

SOURCE: Summary based on Office of Elections data (www.valasztas.hu, November 2000)

Reviewing the issues of non-mandatory referenda, (i.e., those related not to redefining settlement jurisdictions) it becomes clear that they typically deal with thorny, “hot” issues that carry a large perceived risk or affect substantial public interests.

5.1.2 Public Hearings and Single-issue Discussion Forums

The council of the local government is obliged to organize at least one public hearing each year. On this occasion, citizens and representatives of local organizations have the opportunity to pose questions and make suggestions to their representatives. There is only sporadic information on the actual use of public hearings as a means of discovering public preferences, however. Our intuitive opinion is that the role of public hearings and similar forums in exchanging information between the local government and the citizens is minimal. (This is somewhat reassured by the Jelenkutató city surveys.)

In 1997, 13 000 citizens from 20 large or medium-sized towns were surveyed. The frequency of mentioning the public hearing as a source of information on local governmental issues was only 3% (whereas the same figure was 70% for local newspapers and 63% for local television; see Figure 3.8). It seems probable that the significance of public hearings as an information channel in the opposite direction (i.e. from citizens to local government) doesn't differ substantially from this pattern.

As far as public hearings as a channel of citizen-to-local government communication function, they often tend to strongly “over-represent” the preferences of relatively small but vocal interest/pressure groups with intense preferences and, consequently, under-represent the interests of the “silent majority”.

5.1.3 Popular Initiative

The popular initiative is a means of putting an issue of substantial public interest on the agenda of the council. A popular initiative is successful if a sufficiently large proportion of local voters—which the local government can define as between five and 10 percent—approves of the initiative. A popular initiative is routinely characterized as “truly exceptional” even by the written explanatory comment preceding the Act on Local Government. (We found no quantitative data on its frequency of use, but most probably it is less significant than public hearings are. In sum, the popular initiative option seems to be not working in practice.)

Although strictly speaking it doesn’t really belong to the group of techniques defined by law, we still choose to mention here the regular office hours of elected local politicians as a further means of information flow from citizens to local politicians. This is justified by the informal institutionalization and regularity of this practice. However, due to a lack of information, the measure of this regularity can be judged only on the basis of sporadic empirical evidence.

5.2 Other Means of Discovering Public Preferences

In this sub-section—which deals with the large and undefined field of “other” means of learning public preferences—we inevitably confront some definition problems. As we noted earlier, public preferences can be expressed/uncovered, (at least in theory), in an unlimited number of ways (i.e., political parties and NGOs, various forms of demonstration, mass media, public opinion surveys, different forms of direct contacts with individual citizens, informal channels, etc.).

Not only the subject, but also the focus of the analysis clearly has to be decided on beforehand. The dividing line—however vague—lies between a more “technical” versus a more “substantial” approach. Corresponding to the orientation of the present paper, we mainly restrict ourselves to the former, more technical focus, and mostly omit questions related to the role of various institutionalized policy actors, more informal pressure and interest groups, etc. There is a great variety of possible means to learn about public preferences, and there are also many ways to compare and group them. Thus, it seemed the most convenient simply to list them one-by-one without too much reference either to their relative importance, or to their relationships to one another.

5.2.1 Personalized Citizen-to-local Government Communication

Naturally every citizen has the right to comment on, complain about, or ask questions regarding any subject matter that belongs to the local government's field of responsibility, either in written form or personally. The Law on Administrative Procedure (1957/IV. Tv.) and the related legal measures provide detailed regulations for the adequate treatment of such citizen feedback. There are detailed statistics available on the number of documents officially filed and handled by local government authorities in each year. However, their classification follows purely legal and technical rules, so it's impossible to determine the proportion of citizen feedback-type documents.

As communication technology develops there are newer, novel means offered for the citizen to reach the local administration. These innovative communication channels include internet communication, and telephone hot-lines. Both of these channels are appropriate for larger communities and administrations. As to the first one, many cities and towns offer the possibility on their web pages to send e-mail messages to councilors, the mayor, or the mayor's office. However, our hypothesis (due to a lack of confirmed data) is that this channel of citizen-local government communication is still not regular.

The Table 8 summarizes the results of a mini-survey exploring internet-based communications practices of the largest Hungarian towns' local governments (22 towns with county rights plus Budapest, which practically includes all settlements above a population of about 50 000).

Table 3.8
**Frequency and Type of use of Internet Communication of Major Hungarian Towns
(January 2001)**

Category	Number
Cities having a website	22
Offering:	
(a) descriptive information on the settlement, its local government, etc.:	18
(b) possibility of e-mail contact with the mayor's office and/or local politicians:	12
(c) access to orders and other decisions of the council:	13
(d) Temporarily not operational:	2
Cities with no website	1
Total	23

SOURCE: Author's survey of January 2001

It can be seen that the use of Internet communication with citizens is wide-spread among major towns, although the proportion of local governments offering the opportunity of on-line citizen-to-local government communication (most often e-mail) is about 50%. Smaller villages—which form the large majority of local governments in terms of their number—presumably tend to rely more on the “conservative”, personal channels of communication. We will discuss some experiences in this regard a few paragraphs below.

Telephone hot-lines have been operating, for example, in Tatabánya (population: 75 000) and Székesfehérvár (population: 107 000) since 1997 and 1996, respectively.²⁵ In both cases, a recording system is attached to the telephone line. (In Székesfehérvár, this is supplemented by a simple menu system and an automatic filing system of received messages). The officer in charge then writes an official memorandum and assigns the case to the appropriate department of the office. There is now an average of three to six calls a day. The experience is that the message recording system is superior to personal or telephone conversation, since it forces the citizen to be “focused” and prevents the communication from becoming “endless”. We emphasize again that there were no national data available for us in this respect; we can say, however, that these techniques are still most probably much more the exception than the rule.

5.2.2 Public Opinion Surveys

Here, again, only sporadic and case-based empirical evidence exists, on which any conclusions can be based. Experiences of the city surveys conducted between 1995 and 2000 indicate that:

- (i) Public opinion surveys are suitable for medium-sized and large settlements to assess the “people’s will” and to follow changes in public attitudes. (The 20 towns involved are among the 35 largest ones in Hungary). Furthermore,
- (ii) a central determinant of the local governments’ aptness to use public opinion surveys is the personality of the mayor.

It is, of course, a substantial question as to what extent survey results are used to inform the policy process, and to what extent they serve other ends, such as selectively manipulating local politics or eluding responsibility for risky and complex decisions. First-hand, subjective experience informs us that there is a substantial reliance on the latter, less “democratic” capabilities of public opinion surveys, as well. But they also indicate that there is a positive trend that points to its real usefulness in discovering public interest and channeling it into the policy process.²⁶

5.2.3 More Traditional Forms of Involving and Inviting the Public into Local Politics

Techniques discussed so far are suitable almost exclusively for larger settlements. Now we turn to techniques used by smaller villages. In Tóth (2000) there is an interesting description authored

by the mayor of Nagybaracska village.²⁷ The village is near the southern border with Yugoslavia, with a population of about 2 600, and suffering from a stagnating local economy (economic activity is overwhelmingly based on agriculture, and there is a large proportion of the elderly). The mayor, now in office for a third term, perceives the local practice as being better than usual. He identifies and evaluates the following techniques of channeling public preferences into the machinery of local politics.

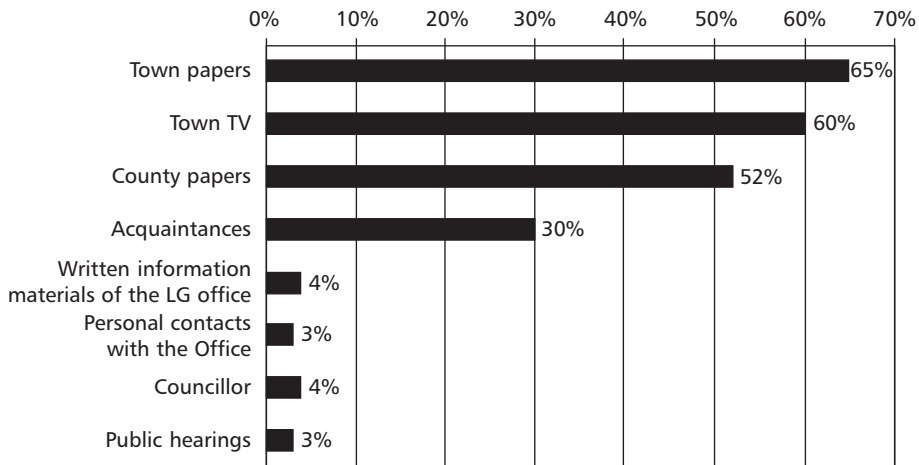
- Public hearings are held once a year. On these occasions, budgets of both previous and coming years are discussed, and citizen complaints, questions and suggestions are posed and answered on issues like public lighting, ownerless dogs, parking places, pavement repairs, public safety, etc. (The number of citizens normally in attendance has stabilized in recent years at about 60–80 people per session.)
- “Office hours” of the mayor: the mayor can be stopped on the street or wherever he is and asked seven days a week. His perception is that this ensures an uninterrupted, continuous communication between his constituency and himself. He is often invited to various local clubs where issues of local policy are sometimes discussed. Regular informal connections extend to the local clergy.
- Local citizens are regularly invited to the meetings of the council via news-bulletins and loudspeakers. In the initial years, two to three people per session attended. But more recently, public attendance has been approaching zero. Furthermore, in accordance with the options provided by the law, external participants are invited in the three committees of the council (the weight of external commission members is 33–40% within the individual committees). The committees have substantial decision-making responsibilities. External participants are: the chief accountant of the local agricultural co-operative, the teacher of the local school, the veterinary surgeon, and the leader of the local association for the handicapped.

5.2.4 The Mass Media

Larger towns’ local government offices frequently have institutionalized procedures for monitoring the agenda of the mass media. The extent to which this information is in fact used can nevertheless only be estimated on an intuitive basis. It seems that the main role played by local mass media is often limited to setting the agenda of the local policy process. This role is probably exercised more often by drawing attention to “hot”, possibly scandalous issues; systematic and unbiased exploration of matters of public interest is presumably rather the exception than the rule.

The importance of local mass media (and other means of communicating with the local public) can be to some extent assessed on the basis of data summarized in Figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9
Citizens’ Sources of Information on Local Issues in Hungarian Towns (1997)
 (frequency of mentioning; representative samples of adult population
 of non-randomly selected towns)



SOURCE: Kiss, Kabai, Dénes, 2001. Based on the Jelenkutató 1995-1998 city surveys

5.2.5 Institutionalized Contacts with NGOs

In the below paragraphs, we present selected results of a survey conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office in the second half of 2000 (the “PMO 2000” survey). An aim of the survey was to assess the importance of local NGOs (or “civic organizations”) as sources of information on public preferences. During the survey, chief officers of local governments were questioned on a number of issues concerning NGO/local government co-operation.

As a first step, we refer to Table 3.6 where we gave an overview of citizens’ and local government chief officers’ assessments on the influence of various policy actors on local decision making. Both citizens and chief officers regarded NGOs as about the sixth or seventh most important player out of about ten. For citizens, this meant a mean score of 51 on a 100-point scale, whereas in the case of chief officers, the mean score was 38. Thus NGOs seem to have, at best, modest influence on local decision making.

Of course, this information is mainly relevant only if NGO importance is to be measured in some “absolute” sense. It does not say much about NGOs’ relative importance compared to the other channels of discovering public preferences discussed above. Another way to assess NGOs’

importance in this regard is to explore the extent to which information exchange between local governments and NGOs is institutionalized within various local governments.

An important organizational solution for communicating with NGOs is to employ an official whose main task is to liaise with local NGOs (“*civil referens*”). Table 3.9 gives some insight into this institutional form’s frequency of use.

Table 3.9
Percentage of Local Governments Having an “NGO Rapporteur” to Liaise with Local NGOs in Various Settlement Size Categories (2000)

A./I Settlement Size	Number of Towns in the Sample Category	Has an NGO Rapporteur [%]
0–5 000	18	0.0
5 001–10 000	46	8.7
10 001–20 000	50	16.0
20 001–50 000	32	31.3
50 001–100 000	6	50.0
100 001–300 000	7	71.4
Total	159	18.9

SOURCE: Calculated from PMO (2000) survey data

It is obvious that larger town halls (usually having several hundred employees) can afford much more easily to hire a separate employee than can smaller offices. Somewhat surprisingly the incidence of NGO rapporteurs is independent from the financial situation of local governments (as measured by per capita budget spending).

There are, however, many other possible forms of institutionalizing co-operation with NGOs in local government decision making. These include assigning the task to an existing official or organizational unit of the mayor’s office, (or to a committee of the council), outsourcing the task to an NGO, etc. Indeed, when asked about the means by which communication with NGOs is resolved, an overwhelming majority of chief officers (141 out of 159) specified some means serving this purpose—most often the first of the above options. However, we have every reason to believe that the above data are biased strongly in a positive direction, based on non-anonymous questionnaires, our previous experience with similar surveys, etc.

Probably the most effective, although a very selective means of channeling NGO preferences into the local policy process is the presence of councilors nominated by one or more NGOs. The ratio of these councilors is relatively high (15.4%) and largely homogenous among various settlement size categories (between 5.6% and 11.3%). When interpreting these figures, however, we have to keep in mind the fact that most of these councilors are nominated simultaneously by several nominating organizations (various parties, associations, etc.). Also, it is very probable in most cases that the nominating party or parties play a decisive role regarding what exactly the representative represents.

However, a feature of so-called “civil influence” is that it not only serves the transparency and political accountability of local politics and politicians, but may also offer a terrain for small interest/pressure groups with specific, narrowly-focussed preferences to exert a disproportionately high influence on the local policy process. This characteristic of the democratic political process—often called an inherent failure of representative government [Weimer–Vining 1989, p. 119 ff.]—is of course less threatening if civil organizations are diverse and citizens’ participation in widespread. But participation in civil organizations is mostly limited to a relatively small proportion of citizens. In 2000, only 9.3% of adult citizens participated in a non-governmental civil organization of any kind, including sporting, cultural, religious, or political associations. If members of sport associations are omitted, this figure decreases to 6.3%.²⁸

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Most of the paper has been focusing, somewhat roughly speaking, on two large subject areas:

- (a) What have citizens been thinking and feeling about their local governments in the past ten years?, and,
- (b) To what extent did their thoughts and feelings penetrate the actual operation of the local government system?

In the following paragraphs, we briefly review the paper’s main conclusions in these two subject areas. Finally, we attempt to formulate some more practical conclusions from the analyses.

6.1 Citizens’ Perceptions: What Are They Like?

Citizens’ perception of local governments range from the definitely positive to the thought-provokingly ambiguous, depending on the measure applied. We considered three different standards.

The most thorough analysis is based on the historically preceding state of affairs, that is the late Communist local administrative system as a selected basis of comparison. In this regard the following statements seem to be valid:

- There is a substantial extent of indifference, one could even say apathy, among citizens towards local government.
- Among those citizens having non-neutral opinions, positive opinions outweigh negative ones. However, the proportion of positive assessments compared to the number of negative assessments has significantly decreased (from about four to one in 1991, to 1.5 to one in 2000).
- An important element of the pretensions and the ideology of opposition/reformist/anti-Communist movements of the 80's as well as an important legitimizing feature of the new system was the emancipation of smaller settlements deemed of "no importance" by the former Communist local-territorial development policy. Although these aspirations in a formal sense have been realized their actual implementation—as reflected by both 'expert' and public opinion, has proven to be largely impossible.

If one decides to interpret the 1991 survey results as indicators of expectations rather than real experience—that is, if one chooses *ex ante* expectations as standard on which to measure local governments' present time performance—then it can be said that, in substantial areas, the new system hasn't fulfilled citizens' early expectations.

Finally, if one decides to measure local governments' public perception as compared to the public's perception on other state or quasi-state institutions—such as the central government or various central governmental organizations (i.e., police, the tax authority, etc.)—then local governments turn out to have quite a positive evaluation. However it might be argued—and to some extent we tend to accept the argument—that this relatively favorable assessment can be attributable in part to the relative lack of information available for citizens and little media scrutiny on local governmental issues.

Thus, the picture of local governments' public perception is controversial. However, it becomes substantially more consistent and less controversial if it is viewed in the framework of the some other factors. Analysis of determinants of citizens' opinions, as well as qualitative considerations, suggest that the problem of local governments' general public perception is best viewed in the context of the wider societal processes that transformed the landscape of practically all social sub-systems in the last ten or so years. We emphasize three such factors.

- (1) The first is the character of the process, which created and subsequently modified the new local government system. It is somewhat paradoxical that a local government system based on elected representative bodies and the principle of local self-governance has been created in such an essentially top-down, "undemocratic" manner in Hungary. That the most

essential policy decisions regarding the shape of the local government system have been to a large extent based on negotiations and bargains among various groups within a relatively narrow “political class” definitely contributed to the alienation and modest public interest shown towards local governmental issues.

- (2) The second such factor (or set of factors) was the economic and in some cases ideological frustration of substantial social groups, who altogether amount even to the majority of the population. This has led to widespread apathy in certain groups, and significant polarization of opinions in others. As to the latter phenomenon, the main determinant of increasingly polarized opinions on local governments’ performance, (but also on many other issues that can be tied to the system change) has been individuals’ personal economic/financial situation. To put it very simply, the better-off one is, the higher he or she values the present situation—which should come as no surprise.
- (3) A third factor influencing local governments’—or, more generally, public institutions’ - perception by the public is the amount and quality of relevant information available to citizens. It seems that both the extent of public interest and levels of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) are strongly related to how much information is available to citizens. The effect of this factor is not always positive, but in some - maybe one can say most—cases, it is ambiguous at best. Higher levels of media scrutiny have led not only to more public interest, but also to a state of affairs in which politics is based on and becomes identical to scandal in the minds of most of the public. This, in turn, can lead to more intense dissatisfaction.

These factors are, of course, not independent from one another, but often have a significant interplay (or, using a statistical term, “interaction effects”). For example, the level of being informed is inherently dependent on personal social and income status, or the level of publicly available information is a main determinant of the top-down character of the creation and modifications of the local government system, etc.

6.2 Citizens’ Perceptions: Do They Count?

A few paragraphs above, we mentioned that on the national government level of local government policy formulation, the influence of the public has been for the most part insignificant. We argued that the initial formulation of the new local government system (adopted by parliament in 1990), as well as its subsequent less fundamental modifications, were primarily the outcome of the “logic of administrative process”, as well as of bargaining between groups and factions within the political elite.

On the micro-level, the picture is more differentiated. On average, people tend to be skeptical as to the possibility of their opinion being taken into account. But their opinions vary along several

dimensions. Although due to lacking data indicating clear trends of the 90s, this couldn't be classified as "rigor". It is more probable that citizens' opportunities to communicate their needs effectively to local governmental decision makers have not improved. (And in terms of the public's perceptions, may even have worsened).

Our results suggest that three explanatory factors deserve emphasis:

- (1) The effect of settlement size is the most straightforward: the larger the settlement, the smaller local politicians' aptitude to get to know what their electorate wants.
- (2) However, further analysis revealed a distinctly more essential determinant of how the public perceives politicians' willingness to learn in different settlement categories. Although the interpretation of the results is not straightforward, analysis of citizens' opinions reveal that in two settlement size categories—settlements between a population of 2 000–5 000 and of 50 000–100 000—citizens perceive that their opinions are known and taken into account much more than in other settlements. This is attributed to the following logic:
 - Settlements' former position occupied within the Communist regional-territorial state (re-) distribution network has a lasting effect. This effect is carried by the amount of "institutional wealth" (basically various elements of public service infrastructure) inherited from the Communist past.
 - Centers of counties and sub-regions which during the previous decades enjoyed a favorable position within the arena of inter-settlement competition for development resources have been, and are, able to serve their citizens' interests to a larger extent. (Local governments have overwhelming importance in providing public services to citizens).
 - Citizens' perceptions of how much they are "listened to" strongly correlates with their local government's ability to ensure an adequate level of public service provision. That is, they do not differentiate too much between the general performance of the local government and local politicians' willingness to learn; the higher the local government's potential to provide public services, the more beneficial its citizens perceive this (somewhat undifferentiated) service provision/aptitude to educate themselves about complex political issues.
- (3) A third and largely untested—but, in our opinion, most important—determinant was identified mainly on the basis of qualitative considerations is the personal characteristics and commitment of local politicians, especially mayors.

The level of technical refinement in the field of actual means used in citizen-to-local government communication seems to be sufficient, or maybe even more than that. On the basis of available empirical evidence the ways in which—and the aims pursuant of which—the various techniques are in fact used or misused can't be identified properly. In fact, very little is known about the substantive channels and processes by which public preferences penetrate, and are communicated towards, local politics. However, it seems that "ordinary citizens" and their civil organizations

rarely exert a substantial influence on local decision making [Csegény, Kákai 2000, pp. 142–143]. In some cases techniques of revealing the public’s preferences are even used rather to manipulate public opinion or the local policy process than to reveal real preferences and channel them into local politics.

6.3 Practical Conclusions

In attempting to formulate practical recommendations for local policy makers on the basis of the previous analyses two somewhat contradictory sets of factors seem to be identifiable.

- (1) Although it might seem somewhat trivial, it might nevertheless be noteworthy that variables expressing general well-being of the local population and financial resources available to the local government set powerful constraints against high citizen satisfaction levels. Of course, these constraints are far from being “absolute”, and operate only in a probabilistic manner. Nevertheless, the poorest 20% (in terms of *per capita* income) of the 175 settlements surveyed in 2000 were not represented at all in the top 20% group of general citizen satisfaction. Thus, it follows that a central goal of a local government seeking to raise its public evaluation should be to promote the general well-being of the local populations and the level of public service provision - a conclusion that would hardly be questioned by any practitioner or theoretician in the field.
- (2) The other factor, in the opposite, emphasizes the importance of local policy makers’—first of all, mayors’—commitment to pursue an efficient strategy to communicate with the electorate. It is unclear if it is the true efforts to promote citizen participation and a functional local democracy, or the more “cynical” professionalism of political PR that can exert greater impact on the public’s perception of its local government. Some empirical evidence exists that both uses of a communication strategy can have significant effects. It seems probable, however, that either way the mayor decides to go, he or she needs to exhibit a definite long-term commitment and sufficient resources.

Of course, true efforts to improve citizen-local government communication and participation on the one hand, and “cynical PR professionalism” on the other do not exclude one another. They can be—and in fact probably are—used in a combined way. It also seems that the most important precondition of a more perceptive policy making style is not financial or professional resources, but the subjective intent of local decision makers to go that way—either for altruistic-idealistic or for more egoistic (i.e. re-election) reasons.

If the target audience of our recommendations is not local policy makers, but in the framework of a more macro-level view the policy recommendations are aimed at national level policy actors (e.g. central government, NGOs, international actors etc.) then the above considerations can be extended at two points.

The first of the above mentioned sets of factors included the socioeconomic context and the operational performance of local policy making and local service provision. While the former can be influenced only very slowly and indirectly (if at all), the quality of local service provision can be raised more effectively by various development programs, such as training programs, technical assistance, and so on. This could be one of the central action fields in improving citizens' overall opinions of their local government.

The second of the above mentioned sets of factors—local policy makers' commitment and ability to pursue effective communication strategies—turns our attention towards behavioral and cultural patterns among mayors and other top local policy makers. This opens up a second central action field of development policies. Training and, more generally, organizational development within local governmental organizations can have a significant effect on promoting the establishment of truly perceptive and participative local governmental operations.

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NOTES

- ¹ We express our gratitude to György Gajduschek, Tamás M. Horváth and József Kiss for their comments and ideas.
- ² A good overview of the existing system is given in English by Temesi (2000). Thus we restrict ourselves to a very brief summary of the fundamental facts about the local government system.
- ³ The specific legal-organisational form and extent of responsibility taken by local governments in running various public services varies to a large extent. The local government’s share of responsibility varies, too; in some cases it is entirely borne by the local government (e.g. local roads, public transport etc. are both financed and managed by the local government), in other cases responsibility for funding and/or management is shared by other institutional players (social security funds, central government etc). A description of local public service provision can be found in Temesi (2000) pp. 365–369.
- ⁴ Another analysis—placed in an international comparative context—of the initial attitudes towards local governments based on the same survey data can be found in Rose et al. (1996).

- ⁵ Although the system that had existed before 1990 didn't call itself Communist—and neither would it be reasonable to qualify it with that term – in order to avoid confusing it with present-time Socialist/Social Democrat streams, and for the sake of uniform use of language we use the term 'Communist' instead of adhering to the adjective 'Socialist'.
- ⁶ For some details on the *modus operandi* of the Communist local-territorial administration and the „decentralisationism” and localism of reformist/anti-Communist movements see Baldersheim–Illner (1996).
- ⁷ Percentages are usually rounded to integer numbers, opinion scores, ratings, etc. are usually rounded to 1 decimals.
- ⁸ Although the wordings of the two items are slightly different as well as the preceding questionnaire items we judged them suitable for the purpose of direct comparisons.
- ⁹ Compared to the total number of respondents.
- ¹⁰ Another spectacular feature here is the downward sloping character of this pattern at settlements below 1000 inhabitants. We will come back to this phenomenon in the next point.
- ¹¹ The survey took place in November 2000; it included the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. See Kolosi–Tóth–Vukovich 2000.
- ¹² Turnout data published by other authors in some cases don't coincide with data presented here (for example, Bóhm 1999). One reason for this might be the many different ways, in which—due to the difficult election system—the „number of valid votes” can be operationalised.
- ¹³ For the purpose of analysing the relationship between RR–N and settlement size respondents from the town Szentendre as extreme outliers have been removed from the data set.
- ¹⁴ The pattern exhibiting relatively low values in smaller settlements doesn't change even if the effect of per capita household income or educational level or respondent, settlement level average personal income, or ratio of elderly in the settlement is controlled.
- ¹⁵ In 2000 almost 30% of local governments received exceptive financial support from the central government due their inability to cover their budgetary deficit by own resources (Népszabadság, 24 November 2000, p. 5.).
- ¹⁶ An illustrative indicator is that per capita consumption was 84.2% of the 1990 level in 1996, and 90.5% in 1998 (National Office for Statistics data; <http://www.ksh.hu/hun/h1998/h104ha98/h10404.html> – 10 January 2001); meanwhile income and consumption inequalities multiplied within a few years (TÁRKI 1999, TÁRKI 2000 surveys). Corresponding to the ends and means of the present study we will restrict ourselves to identifying and following this process only through “soft” opinion data .
- ¹⁷ The primary means of ensuring this preference were the election rules regulating the possibility of voting on lists of nominating (party) organisations.

- ¹⁸ In 1991 respondents were asked to rate between 1 (much worse) and 5 (much better) the possibility of the (ordinary) people to influence local government decisions, compared to the situation two years earlier. In 2000 the question was to what extent local decisions reflect the preferences and interests of local citizens (rated again between 1/“not at all”, and 5/“fully”).
- ¹⁹ Data source: the Jelenkutató (1995–1998) city surveys; results published in Kiss–Kabai–Dénes (2001).
- ²⁰ The scale used originally was slightly different; we transformed it into one that is comparable with the other scales used in the study.
- ²¹ Kiss, József (*personal comment, October 2000*).
- ²² This is, of course, not unique to the Hungarian local government sector; for further arguments – both empirical and theoretical – see e.g. Stoker (1991)
- ²³ There are some additional options defined by law that ensure citizens’ participation, such as various public forums, the participation of public interest groups and associations in the work of the council, etc. These options can be elaborated in the statutes of local governments. Complaints, questions, etc. related to state administrative acts carried out by the local government authorities are not discussed here; we will briefly refer to them in the next sub-section (“Other means of discovering public preferences”).
- ²⁴ It is interesting that council members (representatives) are not required by law to make themselves personally available for their constituencies (no mandatory calling hours, etc.); however it seems often to be the case that they have some regular office hours for consulting their electors. This might be due to the institutionalisation of regular calling hours made obligatory by the pervious, Communist regulation on local governments.
- ²⁵ Tóth János (2000) pp. 108-110. The Appendices to the manual offer numerous examples and case descriptions of various techniques used in communicating with the local public
- ²⁶ Kiss, József (*personal comment; October 2000*). This impression is reassured by information from the user side of opinion surveys: the former mayor of Budapest 19th District Local Government (between 1994 and 1998) commented that there were a variety of purposes of the local government conducting regular public opinion surveys, once or twice a year. But, he added, ‘it was in fact never the real purpose of opinion surveys to decide on actual policy issues’ (Gábor Zupkó, *personal comment, November 2000*).
- ²⁷ “The special practice of Nagybaracska village in fostering communication between its citizens, and the councilors and the mayor”; Tóth (2000) pp. 152–154.
- ²⁸ Calculated from Jelenkutató (2000) survey data.

Sympathetic Disengagement:
Public Perception
of Local Governments
in Poland

Pawel Swianiewicz

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Local government reform is widely viewed as one of the most successful parts of the political, social and economic transformations in Poland since 1989. Local government reform may have not been the most talked-about type of political initiative, but it has occupied quite a high position in the political agendas of successive governments.

On May 26 1990, one day before the first democratic local elections in Poland, Prof. Jerzy Regulski—a prominent academic and one of the main authors of decentralization reform—announced on television that the next day, “Polish citizens would wake up in a new country”. But have they noticed that change? And how do they see local governments and their operations now, after over a decade of the new system in operation? Do they care about decentralization reforms, or do they think they have been, at best, of secondary importance? And finally, how do local governments try to communicate with their citizens between election campaigns? This chapter tries to present brief answers to all of these questions.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN POLAND

Local government reform was one of the priorities for the first post-Communist government, formed in September 1989. Quick, but intensive preparations allowed for the passage of the new Local Government Act in March 1990. This was followed by local elections that May, then by a radical decentralization of financial regulations in January 1991.

The 1990 reform introduced elected local government at the municipal (*gmina*) level only. The upper tiers of territorial divisions remained managed by the state administration. This solution was treated as provisional, mainly because it was argued that the division into 49 small regions (*województwa*), introduced by the Communist administration in the mid-seventies, was dis-functional and required major modifications. It was assumed that new, elected regional government should be introduced together with territorial division reforms.

For a number of reasons beyond the scope of this chapter, the introduction of elected self-governments at the upper tiers [constituting over 300 *powiats* (counties) and 16 regions] required much longer negotiations than had been initially expected. It took almost eight years before reform was introduced at the beginning of 1999.

Between 1990 and 1998, there were two important changes in the local government system. In 1994, 46 of the country’s largest cities were granted extended functions, and now enjoy *county* status. And since 1996, all municipal governments are responsible for managing their primary schools. Before this date, taking responsibility for primary schools was voluntary, and although

the number of municipal schools increased systematically, still only a quarter of municipalities managed their own primary education in 1995.

As in 1990, the 1998 reform was prepared very quickly, despite very lengthy but ineffective discussions over the previous years. The specific directions of the government proposals were formulated at the beginning of 1998. Elections to county and regional councils were held that October, and new tiers of government started their operations on 1 January 1999. Many important legal regulations were approved at the last minute (or even later) as both the Act on Revenues of Territorial Self-Government, and precise regulations on divisions of competencies between different levels of government, and between local and state administrations, were discussed in parliament after 1998 local election.

Local governments are financed by a mixture of their own revenues (mostly local taxes set within legal limits and collected by local governments); shares in revenues collected within the respective local unit territory from central income taxes, and by transfers from the national government. For municipal governments, the proportion of local revenues is significant (33%). The proportion of grants is not predominant [24% from general, (i.e., not ear-marked), and 14% from specific grants]. But county and regional budgets are mostly financed through transfers from the central government. This situation is treated as provisional, but there is a general willingness to increase county and regional revenues. Plans to do so, however, are not specific.

Table 4.1
Distribution of Local Governments by Population Size in Poland (1999)

Municipal (<i>Gmina</i>) Tier			County (<i>Powiat</i>) Tier			Regional (<i>Województwo</i>) Tier		
Size [Thousands]	Number	[%] in Total Number of <i>Gmina</i> Governments	Size [Thousands]	Number	[%] in Total Number of County Governments	Size [Millions]	Number	[%] in Total Number of Regional Governments
1.3–2	7	0.3	22–50	57	15.2	1–2	6	37.5
2–5	573	23.0	50–70	90	24.1	2–3	6	37.5
5–10	1 064	42.7	70–100	103	27.5	3–5.1	4	25.0
10–20	506	20.3	100–150	78	20.9			
20–40	199	8.0	150–200	24	6.4			
40–100	94	3.8	200–1 650	22	5.9			
100–950	47	1.9						

These reforms granted a wide range of functions to municipal governments. They are responsible for pre-school and primary education, most infrastructural services (i.e., water and sewage services, central district heating, gas, solid waste disposal, city public transportation, local roads construction and maintenance, municipal housing, social welfare, etc.). The list of county (*powiat*) functions is much shorter and mostly includes secondary education, health care, county roads, employment policy, natural disaster protection, consumer protection, inspections (such as sanitary, building) and some others. The aggregate county budget is only a small fraction (about a quarter) of aggregate municipal budgets.

Such a division of functions is possible because of the relatively large size of municipal units in Poland. An average *gmina* has a population of about 16 000 and an average area of 125 square kilometers. This means that a typical Polish *gmina* is quite big compared with many other European countries, although it is likely to be much smaller in terms of population than most British or Swedish municipalities. The average *gmina* is similar than its Norwegian, Danish or Dutch counterparts, and is much larger than Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, French or Italian comparable municipalities. (The size distribution of Polish municipalities is shown in Table 4.1). Only a few of them have less than 2 000 people, and none of them has less than 1 000 citizens.

2. WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS?

2.1 Do People Care?

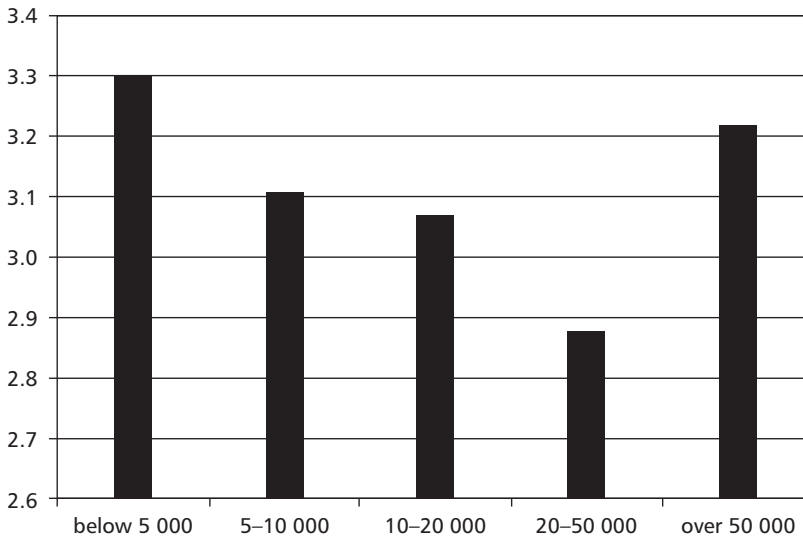
Is local government an institutional system that attracts citizens' attention? Do they think it is relevant in their everyday lives? Before we try to analyze public opinion, let us try to answer what local authorities feel about public involvement in their core activities.

In 1997, over 500 mayors responded to a questionnaire¹ in which they were asked to what extent citizens are interested in local council activities. The answers were on a five-point scale from "not interested at all" to "very interested". The proportion of mayors who chose the two highest scores ("interested" or "very interested") was somewhat higher than those who said "they do not care at all" or were "very uninterested" (33%—"interested"; 22%—"none, or little interest").

There was also an interesting pattern of variation between local governments of different sizes. A higher degree of interest was found in the smallest communities—especially high in communities of up to 5 000 residents (44% "interested" and only 18% "not interested"). In larger local governments, interest as perceived by mayors decreases, being the lowest in the group of communities between 20 000–50 000, where the number of those not interested outscored the number of those who were interested. In the largest cities, public interest again increased significantly,

although it was still lower than in the smallest communities. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 4.1 on a scale of one to five, where “3” represents an equal number of interested and uninterested citizens.

Figure 4.1
Mayor’s Opinion of Citizens interest in Local Government Activities
According to Community Size
(1–5 scale, 1997)



As for citizen behavior and perception, the first answer to the questions asked at the beginning of this section may be provided by the analysis of the turnout in local elections. If people think that local government plays a significant role, they should be willing to vote for their local councilors.

This indicator does not offer very positive messages for the prospects of local democracy in Poland. During the last decade, Poland has had three local elections: in 1990, 1994 and 1998. Turnout in all was quite low—the average for the whole country was between 32% in 1994 and 46% in 1998. The trend over time has not been positive, either. Between 1990 and 1994, turnout decreased from 42% to 32%. Although participation in 1998 was higher (46%), this may be explained by very vital political discussions on territorial reform which attracted much public attention, rather than by any increase in interest in local democracy. Moreover, local turnout has always been considerably lower (sometimes even about 20 percent lower) than in close-in-time national elections, whether parliamentary or presidential.

*Table 4.2***Turnout in Local, Parliamentary and Presidential Elections in Poland**

	1989–1990	1993–1995	1997–2000
Local	42% (1990)	32% (1994)	46% (1998)
Parliamentary	63% (1989)	51% (1993)	47% (1997)
Presidential	61% (1990)	68% (1995)	61% (2000)

SOURCE: Statistical Yearbooks, GUS, Warszawa

The positive interpretation of facts quoted above may refer to Lipset's argument (1981) saying that low participation in elections may result from a relatively high level of satisfaction. People are more willing to vote if they see an actual necessity to change something, rather than when they feel generally satisfied. In such a situation, low turnout does not necessarily mean that people do not care about local democracy. They may think that it works well and they do not see a reason for their potential electoral intervention.

However, this interpretation is undermined by the data presented in Table 4.3. While a majority of respondents are convinced that national-level institutions have a big impact on their lives, in the case of local government, only one-third believe in any big impact being possible via local government decisions. Almost one in six respondents did not perceive any influence of local government decisions on his or her own life.

*Table 4.3***Do you Feel That Decisions Made by the Following Institutions have a Significant Impact on Your and Your Family's Life?**

	Big impact	Small impact	No impact
National government	49	33	12
Parliament	46	35	13
Local government	34	42	16

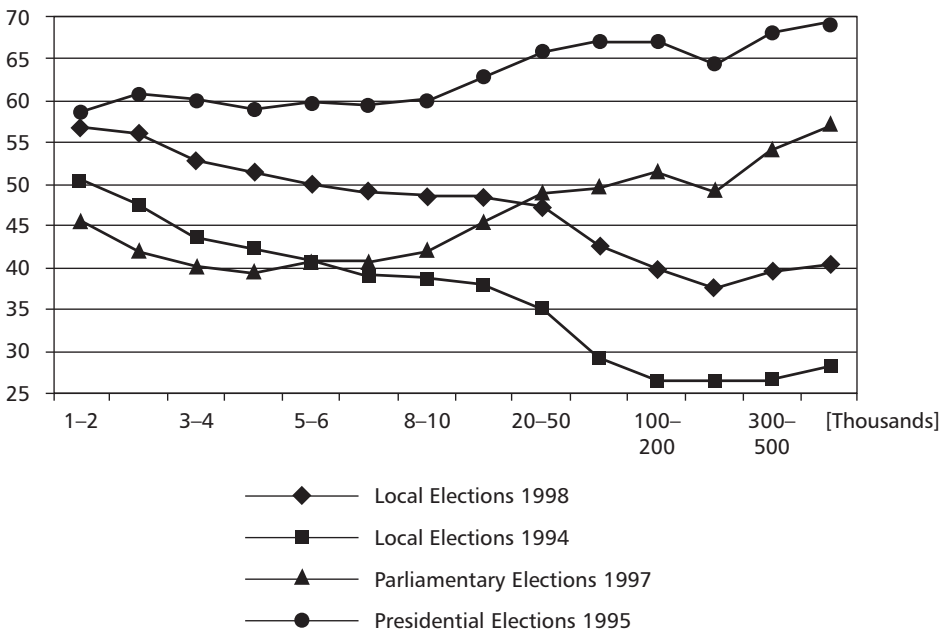
SOURCE: CBOS survey of citizens, March 1994

One more important difference between perceptions of politics on a national and on a local level relates to the size of communities. While interest in national politics increases with the size of a community, it is quite the opposite at the local level.

In general, the smaller the local government, the higher the turnout in local elections (See Figure 4.2.). But in the case of presidential or parliamentary elections, the highest turnout is usually found in the largest cities. Differences in interest and willingness to participate in politics are usually explained by the amount of information to which a citizen has access. This is usually related to social status indicators such as educational level, wealth and occupation. In larger cities, people are usually better educated and more wealthy. This explains their better orientation towards public matters and, consequently, their higher overall level of participation in political life.

But the nature of local politics is different, and the same factor that explains high turnout in national elections in large cities may also explain the opposite relationship in local elections. Size remains the most powerful explanatory variable for turnouts, even when mitigated by other variables such as levels of income or education of the local population. As we will see in the next sections, people in small communities feel (and are) much better informed about their local political process than citizens in the largest agglomerations.

Figure 4.2
Turn-out in Local and Central Elections and the Size of Municipalities



Also, the subjective perception of local elections' importance varies depending on the size of a community. In 1998, respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of local elections on a 10-point scale, where "10" signifies the greatest importance. (Results are presented in Table 4.4.)

In rural communities and small towns, people believe in the value of local elections much more than in larger municipalities. Moreover, the variation between the less educated and those with university degrees suggests that the discrepancy is not due to different social structures, but rather to the fundamentally different nature of local politics between smaller and larger communities.

Table 4.4
The Importance of Local Government Elections on a 1 to 10 scale
(10 = highest importance)

Variation by Municipality Size		Variation by the Respondents' Education	
Rural community	7.40	Primary	7.00
City below 20 000 population	7.69	Vocational	7.01
City 20 000–100 000	7.36	Secondary	7.57
City 100 000–500 000	6.92	University degree	7.95
City over 500 000	7.15		

SOURCE: CBOS survey of citizens, October 1998

Citizen perception and voting behavior confirms the mayors' opinions that people in smaller communities are the group the most interested in their local governments' operations. But the mayors' views that citizens in the largest cities are more interested than those in mid-size local governments is not confirmed, either by electoral behavior or by the popular perception of local government's "importance".

Reform theorists [e.g., Mouritzen, 1989] might argue that citizens' willingness to participate in local politics might be more pronounced in bigger local governments, because large administrative units may be granted more functions. This results in local politics becoming more important for people's everyday lives. In Poland, cities of over 100 000 citizens (as well as a few smaller cities) have been responsible for more services than smaller local governments since 1993. However, neither the data provided in Figure 4.2, nor those in Table 4, provide support for reform theory suggestions. It seems that the nature of social life and politics in small communities is much more important than the amount of functions that local governments are responsible for.

Participation in local elections also has an interesting regional variation. In general, voter turnout is considerably higher in south-eastern Poland (regions near Kraków and Rzeszów) and in mid-western Poland (especially around Poznań) than in eastern, central, northern or western Poland. (This pattern is similar to the variation in national election turn-outs, and is usually explained by the stronger tradition of civic involvement and self-organization in regions with higher participation levels in the elections²)

One more illustration of the relatively limited citizen interest levels in local government issues is provided by the survey organized in 2000 by the USAID Local Government Partnership Project in 10 municipalities³. The survey asked respondents to look at three briefly described procedures, then identify the one required to elect their councilors. On average, only 21% of potential voters were able to identify the procedure used in their locality. In some municipalities, as large a proportion as 70% was unable simply to choose between three options, and just picked the “don’t know” response.

Regarding the rules of the mayoral election, only 43% of respondents knew that mayors in Poland are elected by their councils. Nine percent believed that mayors were elected directly by voters. These results suggest that either the election law in Poland is too complicated and citizens do not follow it, or that they do not care too much about local governments and local elections.

2.2 Do Citizens Know About Local Politics?

In the previous section, I have analyzed how much Polish citizens care about local government. Now, I shall try to determine how much they know about the topic. One dimension of local government knowledge is how many constituents know any of their local representatives. Also, in this respect there is a huge difference between small communities and larger agglomerations. Table 4.5 shows how often people personally know councilors and candidates in local elections.

Table 4.5
Do you know personally... [percentage of “yes” answers]

A. Any Councilors in Your Municipality? (1996)			B. Any Candidates in Local Elections? (1998)	
	1992	1996		
Rural community	44	67	Rural community	81
City below 50 000 citizens	29	48	City below 20 000 citizens	74
City 50–200 000	29	31	City 20–100 000	60
City over 200 000	21	24	City 100–500 000	46
			City over 500 000	31

SOURCE: Swianiewicz, Bukowski (1992) Demoskop 1996 and CBOS November, 1998

Not surprisingly, citizens overwhelmingly know candidates more often than actual councilors. In 1992, almost half, and in 1996 more than two thirds of rural residents—but only a quarter of city dwellers in large cities—knew at least one councilor. Similarly, in 1998 the vast majority of citizens in rural communities and small towns knew at least one candidate in the election; in cities

of over half a million, more than two-thirds did not know any. Although the questions asked in 1992 and 1996 were not identical to those asked in 1998, it seems that knowledge of councilors has gradually grown. Between 1992 and 1996, the fastest growth involved municipalities of below 50 000 residents.

The variation between small and large local governments is self-explanatory. If there is anything surprising in the data presented in Table 4.5, it is the relatively large number of citizens of large cities declaring that they know some councilors. One may expect that some respondents answered “yes” even if they knew a councilor by name or “by face” (e.g., from local television) only. Otherwise, we would need to believe that a statistical councilor of a large city was known by at least 2 000 adult citizens!

Knowing someone from local authorities is only one dimension of “knowing something” about local governments. Equally important is how well informed citizens are about local government activities. In a 1996 OBOP survey, 14% of respondents agreed that local authorities sufficiently informed them about the latter’s activities, 39% agreed to some extent, while 23% disagreed to some extent and 8% strongly disagreed. (The rest of the respondents had no opinion.)

This means that just slightly over half of surveyed citizens felt sufficiently informed—not an extremely good result. We do not have precise data on the development of opinions on that issue in the following years. But the survey conducted in 2000 by the USAID Local Government Partnership Program in 10 selected Polish local governments suggests that the situation has not changed for the better. Only 3% of respondents agreed with the opinion “during the last year I learned more about *gmina* affairs, as compared to the previous year”. Thirty-one percent agreed somewhat with this statement, while 37% disagreed somewhat, and 13% strongly disagreed.

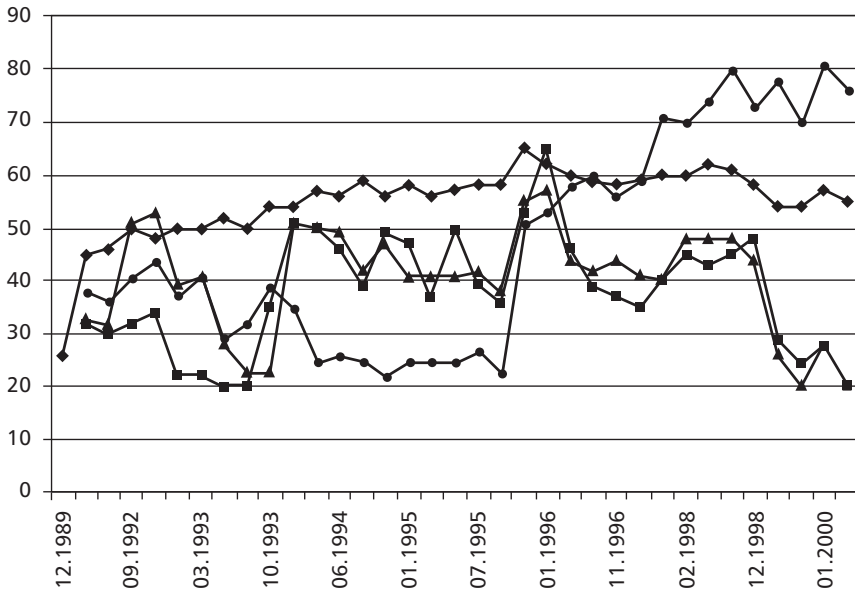
Those who improved their knowledge on local government activities were clearly in minority. (We will return to the problem of communication between local authorities and citizens in the last section of this chapter.)

2.3 Do Citizens Trust Their Local Government Officials?

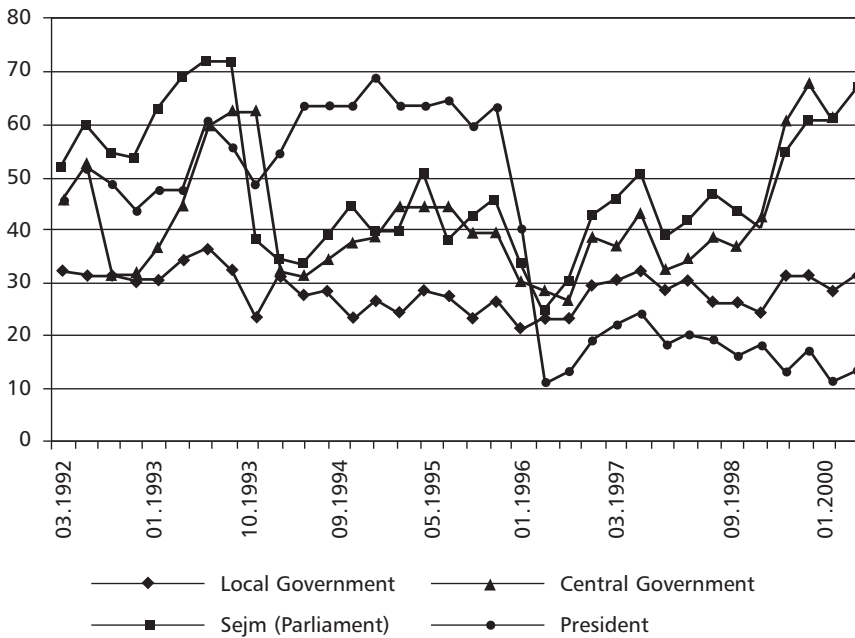
To a large extent, the answer is affirmative. Figure 4.3 shows that the level of trust has been relatively stable throughout the last decade, and is much higher than the overall level of trust in national government. (Any comparison with public trust in the president is more complicated, because such opinions have been fluctuating dramatically for some time.)

The dynamics of the discussed phenomena are quite interesting. First of all, the level of trust has increased sharply with the decentralization reform of 1990. Former “people’s councils” were trusted by only about a quarter of all citizens, while newly elected democratic councils achieved the trust of almost half of the population almost immediately.

Figure 4.3
Citizens' Trust in Public Institutions



Public Disapproval of Government Institutions



The evaluation of local government activities was slowly but gradually improving until 1995, and has stabilized at a relatively high level (60% expressing trust) since then. It is very striking that the assessment of local governments (opposite to the assessment of national level political institutions) has been so stable and free of short-term fluctuations. However, what might be imminent is a very slow, but visible decrease of the level of trust since the beginning of 1999. (Indeed, this process has been parallel to the recently more critical portrayal of local governments in the media, including more articles describing cases of corruption in municipal government and public disapproval of the relatively very high salaries of city boards and senior local officials.)

As in previously described cases, the general assessment of local governments is much better in smaller communities. In 1999, the level of trust varied from 60% in rural areas and 59% in cities below 20 000, to below 50% in cities of over 100 000. Interestingly, the highest level of trust is among the younger generation of adults (64% of trust in the 18–24 age group): a much better result than among older generations (only 45% of trust in the over-65 age group).

Most people believe that local councils try to satisfy the needs of ordinary citizens. Also in this case, the proportion of positive opinions almost doubled after the 1990 reform, and has continued to grow steadily (see Table 4.6). Again, more positive opinions are found among respondents from small rural communities. But at the same time, the proportion of citizens who think that local governments care mostly about their own interests is quite high and is even increasing. In the largest cities, the proportion of people believing as much has reached 50%.

Table 4.6

Citizens' Opinions on Motives of Local Government Decisions "Do Local Governments...?"

	10/1989	06/1993	06/1996	2000
try to satisfy citizens needs	31	41	50	41
– rural communities		51		
– towns up to 20 000		41		
– cities 20–100 000		42		
– cities 100–500 000		27		
– cities over 500 000		30		
care mainly about their own interests		36	40	
– rural communities		28		
– towns up to 20 000		40		
– cities 20–100 000		40		
– cities 100–500 000		40		
– cities over 500 000		50		

SOURCES: 1989—A. Sarapata (quoted in K. Pelczynska-Nalecz 1998), 1993—CBOS, 1996—OBOP, 2000—LGPP

The relatively good score of local governments is undermined by the widespread belief that municipal authorities are corrupt. A recent World Bank report [*Corruption in Poland...*, 1999, p. 12] on corruption in Poland indicates the following areas in which local governments are especially vulnerable to corruption: zoning decisions, licenses and permits, contracts for construction works, and goods and services.

Regardless of the real situation, it is very dangerous for the prospect of local democracy that many people believe that local government is more corrupt than other political institutions. Such an opinion, for example, has been quite recently expressed by the President’s main economic advisor, Marek Belka [“Strategia na...”, 1999]).

It is also very important to stress that general public opinion changes, as well. In 1995, the CBOS public opinion poll suggested that corruption was more frequent at the national level; (24% of respondents, while only 10% thought it was more frequent on a local level). But a similar 1999 survey showed that people believed graft was as frequent in the national administration as in local governments (57% thought it was the same, with 15% thinking it larger at the national, and 14% at the local level). A July 2000 survey confirmed this worsening in opinions of local governments, illustrated by Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4
Is Corruption a Problem of Central or Local Administration?
 —Citizens’ Opinions

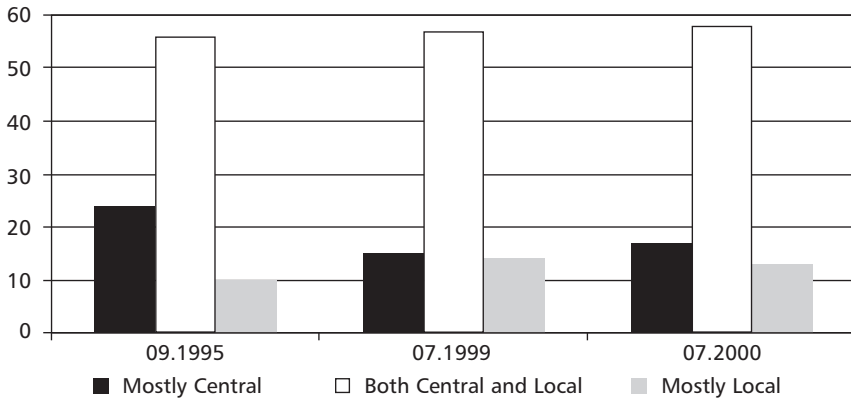
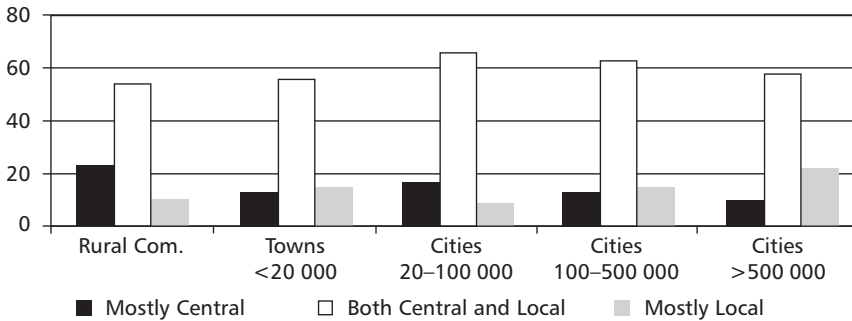


Figure 4.5 details the belief that corruption is mostly a national administration disease that still manages to prevail in rural communities, while inhabitants of large cities believe that it happens more often in local administrations. Negative opinions regarding local authorities also dominate among respondents with university degrees, while those with lower education more often believe in local officials’ honesty.

Figure 4.5

Is Corruption a Problem of Central or Local Administration? (07.2000) —Citizens' Opinion

According to a recent survey⁴, 15% of citizens claim to know someone who bribed a local bureaucrat or councilor at least once. Such a situation is much more frequent in large cities (21% in cities of 50–100 000 population) than in rural areas (11%) and much more common in eastern (22% Świętokrzyski, 22% Małopolski region) than in western Poland; (only 6% in Lubuski and 7% in Opolski region).

Opinions from entrepreneurs are more pessimistic. As many as 38% say they know another businessman who offered a bribe. The regional pattern is again similar (70% in Warmińsko-Mazurski, 52% in Lubelski in eastern Poland, but much less in western Poland: 13% in Opolski). As was the case in issues discussed above, there is again a variation depending on the size of the community—self-described “urban businessman” report corruption twice as often as their colleagues living in rural areas.

One third of citizens are convinced that offering a bribe “does not matter” (i.e., it does not necessarily help to solve your problem in your local administration), but such optimistic views are expressed by only 13% of local enterprise owners. The rural-urban pattern is similar again. For example, while 22% of rural businessmen think that offering a bribe does not matter, such an opinion in the largest cities was expressed by only 5% of respondents. Also, the pattern of regional variation is quite similar to the case of the previous question.

The opinion that offering a bribe is almost inevitable when attempting to solve a problem was expressed by slightly over 10% of citizens and local entrepreneurs. This proportion has remained unchanged since 1993, when the issue was investigated in a survey organized by CBOS.

2.4 Are Citizens Satisfied?

What do people think about the results of local government activities? In June 1993, the number of those who believed that it led to positive results minimally outscored the number of those who

did not (36% seeing positive against 35% who did not—see CBOS, June, 1993). The number of positive opinions strongly prevailed in rural communities (42% against 29%) and marginally in cities of less than 100 000. In the largest agglomerations, the trend was definitely negative (in cities of over 500 000, 21% positive against 50% negative).

But the number of those who think that the quality of local administration has been improving dramatically outscored the number of those who think it has been worsening. Due to significant short-term fluctuations, it is difficult to notice any clear trend. But it seems that the number of positive opinions is increasing.

It should be stressed that the most recent survey has brought the most optimistic results, with over 50% believing in improvement (see Table 4.7). It is interesting that opinions expressed close to local elections (the most recent ones were in June 1994 and October 1998) are usually more positive than those expressed in between-elections periods. Those believing in gradual improvement dominate in municipalities from all size groups and among respondents from all education and age groups.

Table 4.7

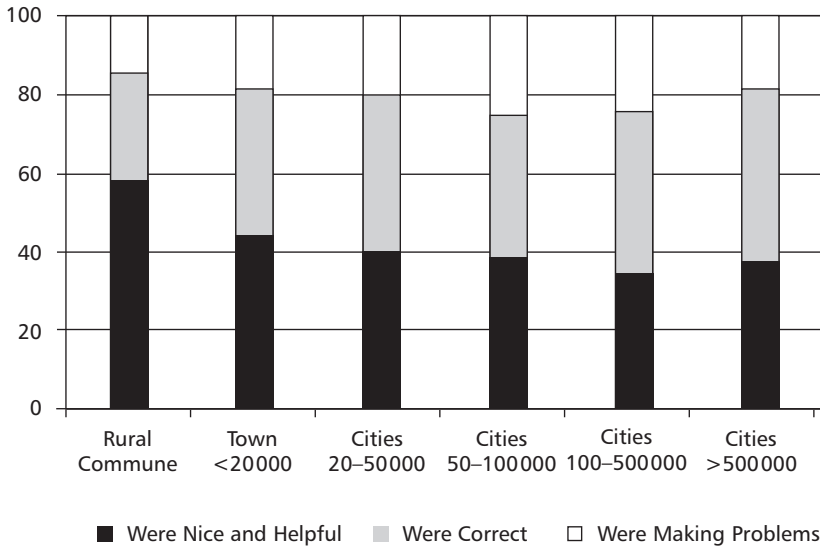
**Has Local Government Activity Improved or Worsened During Last Few Years?
—Citizens' Opinions**

	1992	02.1994	06.1994	01.1996	08.1998
Improved	13	37	41	33	53
Worsened	13	11	13	6	8
No change	37	40	42	56	35

SOURCE: Swianiewicz, Bukowski (1992), CBOS February, 1994, OBOP June, 1994; January, 1996; August, 1998

In 1999, over 3 000 citizens and over 600 owners of small local enterprises were asked about their satisfaction with the client service in their city hall [see Swianiewicz et. al., 2000]. In general, normal citizens who dealt with local administrations were much more satisfied with the way they had been treated than was the case with businessmen. When asked how they felt about officials' attitudes, 46% of citizens said they were "nice and helpful". The proportion of satisfied was much higher in rural governments than in cities of over 100 000. Less than one fifth (19%) of citizens felt that bureaucrats tried to "make things more difficult than necessary". Again, the situation was much more optimistic in rural areas than in large cities. This variation is illustrated in Figure 4.6.

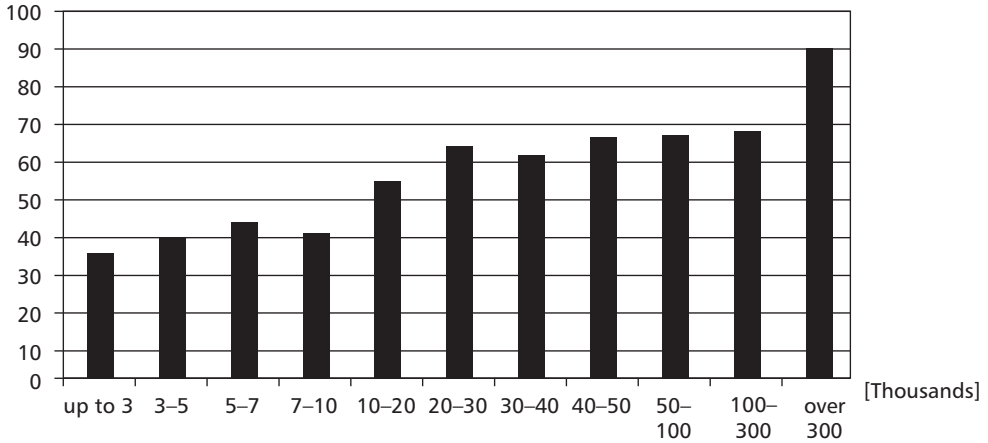
Figure 4.6
**Citizens' Opinion About How Well They Have Been Treated
 by Officials in the Local Town Hall**



Local businessmen's' experiences were much less pleasant. Only 18% of them had the impression that officials tried to be helpful and nice, while 27% were of the opposite opinion. Also in that case, opinions expressed by respondents living in rural areas were much more positive than those from cities. In most cases, the problems of citizens coming to their city hall have been solved quickly and efficiently (52% of respondents). Such positive opinions were again more frequent in rural areas than in large cities.

The indirect measure of satisfaction with local government activity might be the turnover among mayors after elections. Although in Poland, the mayor is elected indirectly by councilors, in the case of electoral defeat, the group supporting the candidate usually puts forward a replacement. This means that general election results are usually indirectly transmitted into the election of a new mayor. Taking into account this indicator, voter evaluations of local governments in the latest (1998) elections were not very positive. In municipalities of over 10 000, most mayors were replaced. In cities of over 40 000, this was the case with over two-thirds of incumbents. And in cities of over 300 000, all but one mayor was defeated (see Figure 4.7). (It should be added that turnover among local mayors in 1998 was considerably higher than after the 1994 elections.)

Figure 4.7
**Proportion [%] of New Mayors After 1998 Local Elections
 and the Size of Municipalities**



But the pessimistic interpretation of this figure should be corrected by two factors. First, 1998 was the year of the first election to newly created governments at county and regional levels. Some municipal mayors decided to run for new offices in higher tiers of government, and some were successful. However, this has not exceeded 10% of such mayors, and so do not change the general picture dramatically.

The second, and probably more important factor (at least in the case of large cities), refers to the nature of 1998 local elections, which for the first time during the last decade centered mostly around political parties. In larger cities—but to some extent also in smaller communities—the voting behavior simply repeated choices made during national level elections. Consequently, even locally popular mayors were lucky to survive unless they were supported by one of the two largest parties. But whatever the interpretation of the facts, the electoral turn-over in 1998 was very high: certainly the highest since 1990, when—in the first democratic election after the Second World War—voters replaced over three-quarters of all councilors nationally.

3. PUBLIC OPINION AND DECENTRALIZATION REFORMS

In this section, we try to address three major questions:

- Do people support decentralization? Do they think local governments should be granted more functions and more powers?.

- What have people thought about major steps in decentralization reforms during the last decade? (We concentrate on two events: the transfer of responsibility for primary schools (obligatory since 1996, but initially planned for 1994), and the introduction of *powiat* and regional tiers of self-government in 1999).
- To what extent have politicians planning and implementing reforms taken citizens' opinions into account?

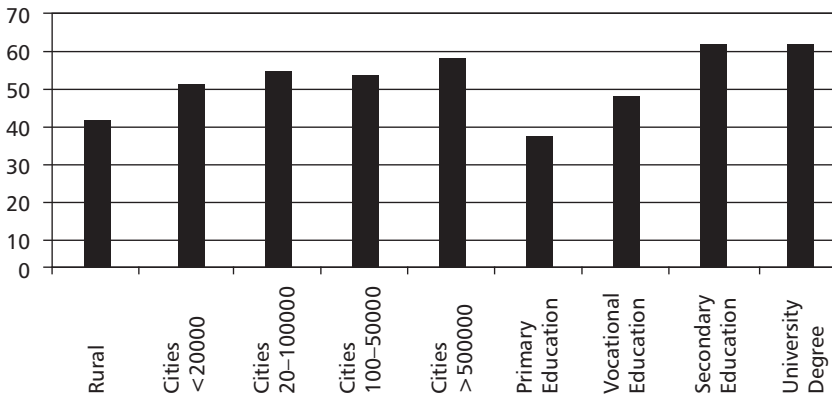
3.1 Support for Decentralization

It seems that most people think that decentralization is good for the country and should proceed further. In 1994, only 5% claimed local government powers were too large while almost half of respondents (49%) were of the opposite opinion. Citizens of big cities and people with secondary or higher education levels were more often proponents of further decentralization.

As shown in Figure 4.8, the opinion that present local government powers are too narrow was expressed by less than half of respondents in rural communities, but by almost two-thirds of citizens in cities of over 500 000. Similarly, just over one-third of people with primary education, but almost two thirds of those with secondary or university degrees, expressed such an opinion. Only 1% of those with university degrees thought that local powers should be narrowed.

Figure 4.8

Local Government Powers Are too Narrow—Percentage of “Agree” According to the Size of Community and Education of Respondent (1994, Citizens’ Opinions)



Two years later, people were asked whether various functions should be managed by local self-governments, or nationally. Most people thought that local governments should be responsible for primary schools, culture, roads construction and maintenance, social services and public

safety, but not for secondary schools and health care. (It should be remembered, however, that the question was asked when the municipal level was the only tier of territorial self-government in Poland.) It is probable that respondents would be more willing to accept county or regional self-government as providing secondary education or hospital services.

Once again, there was a very clear difference between respondents from small and large communities, between those with primary and vocational training, and between those with university degrees. In general, the larger the community and the higher the level of education, the wider the acceptance for decentralization of various functions. (This observation is briefly summarized in Table 4.8.)

Table 4.8
Who Should Manage the Following Functions?

	Average Opinion	Variation by the Size of Community	Variation by the Education
Primary schools	Local government	Rural communities—state administration	Primary education—state administration
Secondary schools	State administration	Cities above 100 000—local	University degree—local
Culture	Local government	Unanimous	Primary education—state
Hospitals	State administration	Unanimous	Unanimous
Polyclinics	State administration	Cities above 100 000—local	Secondary and university degree—local
Roads	Local government	Unanimous	Unanimous
Social services	Local government	Unanimous	Unanimous
Public safety	Local government	Rural—state	Primary—state

SOURCE: OBOP survey of citizens March, 1996

These variations by community size probably have two parallel reasons. The first one is rooted in the empirical observation that small local governments are not prepared to deliver a wide range of functions. They usually do not have enough qualified staff; the majority of users of some services recruit from more than one local government and the delivery of many functions by small territorial units would lead to diseconomies of scale. Despite a very good opinion on their present local governments' activities as shown in previous sections, citizens of small towns and villages may realize that providing additional services in small communities would be both very expensive and difficult to implement.

The second reason might be of a political nature. At least since 1993, the PSL (Peasant's Party) has been strongly opposing many decentralization reforms, including any transferring of responsibility for primary schools to municipal governments. (The PSL influence is strongest in small, rural communities, meaning respondent skepticism may partially reflect the opinions of their political leaders.)

Variation of opinions dependent on respondents' education levels reflects generally higher acceptance of educated people for reforms implemented after 1989.

3.2 The Case for Primary School Decentralization

The 1990 political reforms took an ambivalent position towards the decentralization of responsibility for primary schools. In principle, the Local Government Act granted this responsibility to municipal governments. But other regulations delayed the transfer until 1994. Before that date, taking responsibility for schools depended on the decisions of the local council and was financed by the separate transfer from the national budget. Just before the end of 1993, the newly elected national government decided to delay the reform for another two years. As a consequence, the management of all primary schools was transferred to local councils only at the beginning of 1996.

Table 4.9

Are You for or Against Transferring Responsibility for Primary Schools to Local Governments?

	For		Against	
	March 1994	March 1996	March 1994	March 1996
Total	48	36	41	37
Rural communities	40	29	45	44
Cities below 20 000	51	36	39	25
Cities 20–100 000	51		42	
Cities 100–500 000	51	38	4	31
Cities over 500 000	62	38	28	28
Primary education	41	29	43	38
Vocational education	44	29	47	41
Secondary education	57	38	35	34
University degree	61	46	28	30

SOURCE: CBOS March, 1994 and OBOP March, 1996 surveys of citizens

The data presented in Table 4.9 suggest that popular support for school decentralization was widespread before political discussions on that issue begun, and decreased significantly during

the next two years when opponents of the reform presented their arguments. (It is important to stress that the number of supporters decreased dramatically in all social groups during this period, regardless of the education levels of respondents, or of community size.)

But during the same time, the number of respondents opposing decentralization did not increase. It seems that vigorous discussions among politicians did not help the average citizen to formulate his or her own opinion. On the contrary, people exposed to conflicting messages had difficulties in taking personal positions on this issue. As a consequence “don’t know” or “doesn’t matter” answers became much more frequent—such answers amounted to only 11% of the total in 1994, but 27% in 1996.

In cities of between 20 000 and 100 000, the proportion of undecided was 39% and among respondents with primary education—33%. Not surprisingly, the proportion of undecided was the lowest among respondents with university education and in the largest cities (24%).

3.3 The case of *Powiat*s and Regional Reform (1999)

Powiat (county) reform has been a central political issue since 1993, when the first proposal of the division into about 300 units was presented by the national government. This tier of territorial administration had enjoyed a long tradition in Poland before it was terminated in 1975.

Protagonists of the new reform frequently referred to this long tradition, and talked more about the re-introduction than about any introduction of *powiat* government. In 1993, a decision about the reform was close to fruition, but was stopped by the new government after the September, 1993 parliamentary elections. The PSL, as a rurally-based party and a member of the 1993–1997 governing coalition, was strongly against *powiat* reform, and was able to block any motions involving its restructuring throughout the whole government.

The issue of reform came back to the top of the political agenda after the 1997 parliamentary elections and the establishment of the new government formed by two post-Solidarity parties (AWS—Electoral Action Solidarity and UW—the Union of Liberty). The new government decided on a parallel introduction of four very radical reforms of the state:

- administrative reform, including introduction of *powiat*s but also of large self-government regions (*województwo*);
- pension reform;
- health care reform, and,
- education reform.

These four reforms were made flagships of the new government. In the present section, we analyze how Polish citizens have perceived territorial/administrative reforms. Have they been

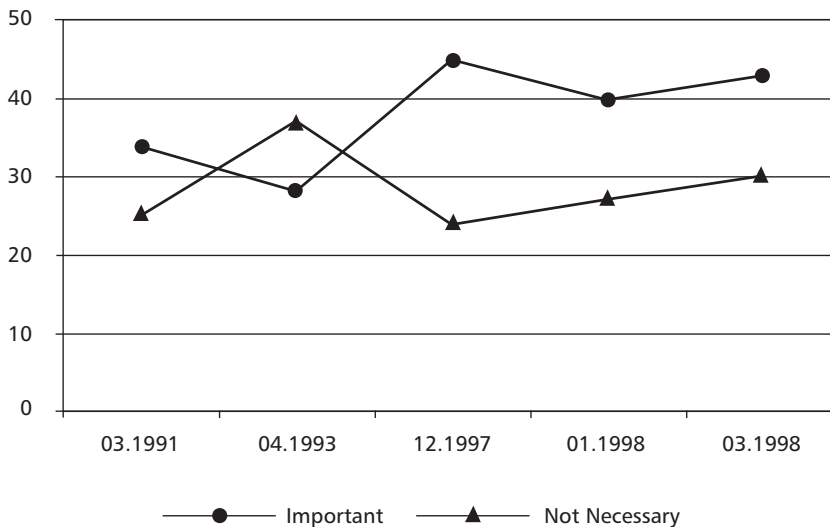
seen as more or less important than the other three reform areas? Have they been seen as more or less successful than other reforms? How have opinions on *powiat* and regional reform changed in recent years, and how do they vary among different groups of citizens?

Public opinion towards the *powiat* reform has fluctuated, and—as it is shown in data presented below—has not always been coherent. As Figure 4.9 indicates, support was quite high at the beginning of the nineties. This decreased in 1993, increased again in 1996–97, then decreased again just before the introduction of the “real” reform in 1998. It is characteristic that the number of those who were against reform was lowest when the possibility of an *immediate* introduction of reform was low (i.e., 1991, 1996–97), but increased during periods when change seemed to be possible and when the overall political debate was the hottest (i.e., 1993, 1998).

Probably, this fluctuation may be explained by two parallel factors:

- (i) As has been well demonstrated by many sociological studies in Poland, in a transition period, most people prefer stability rather than rapid changes, and, they might be afraid of almost any reform when it becomes law.
- (ii) The confusion over contradictory arguments raised by opponents and proponents of the reforms was especially large during periods of the hottest political discussions, (i.e. when reform was closest to implementation).

Figure 4.9
Is the Powiat Reform Important?
(Citizens' Opinions)



This observation is strengthened by more detailed information concerning changes in citizens' opinion on various aspects of the *powiat* reform (see Table 4.10). In 1993, as many as 67% of respondents were afraid that *powiat* reform would increase bureaucracy. (Only 17% were of the opposite opinion). In 1996, this decreased to 41%: the only occasion when the number disagreeing with the statement was larger than the number agreeing (45%).

In 1998, the proportion of those afraid of increased bureaucracy increased again to 54% (22% not agreeing). The pattern of change was very similar in the case of those agreeing with the opinion that *powiat* reform would be too expensive. In 1993, as many as 79% believed so (8% held the opposite opinion). In 1996, this proportion sharply dropped to 39% (again, the number disagreeing was larger—42%). In 1998, the proportion of those afraid of the reform's cost increased again to 49%, with 26% against.

The above paragraph may suggest that most of the public has been against such reforms for most of the time. But the reality is not so clear-cut. As we could see in Figure 4.9, the number of people who thought that these reforms were important was larger than the number of those who thought it was not necessary at all. (1993 marked the only exception to this rule). Moreover, Table 4.10 suggests that people saw many concrete advantages of the reform. In 1996, as many as 79% thought that *powiat* reform would result in better decisions, because new governments would be better oriented towards local needs. (Only 12% were of the opposite opinion.)

Although this proportion decreased in 1998 to 62%, overall opinion was still very positive. Similarly, 74% in 1996 and 53% in 1998 believed that *powiat* reform would help to save public money. (Fourteen percent in 1996 and 22% in 1998 were of the opposite opinion). Finally, the number of those who believed that the introduction of *powiats* would bring more advantages than disadvantages to their personal lives was higher (23%) than those who thought the opposite (16%). It is interesting that more people believed that *powiat* reform was good for the country (31%) than believed it was good for them personally (23%).

The confusing impact of political quarrels over the reform and the shortcomings of the government information policy was reflected by the gradual increase in the proportion of those who could not make their own complete judgement. In 1993, respondents were asked whether the *powiat* reform was too expensive, and 13% answered "don't know". The proportion of "don't know" answers increased to 19% in 1996, and to 25% in 1998.

Similarly, the number of those who had no opinion on *powiats'* impact on public funds saving increased from 12% in 1996 to 25% in 1998. Not surprisingly, the proportion of "no opinions" was highest among citizens of rural areas and among those with primary education. In both of these groups, the proportion of those who had no opinion as to whether the reform would be good either for them or for the country was about one-third in 1998.

Table 4.10
Opinions on the Powiat Reform—Percentage Agreeing with Following Opinions

	Powiat Tier Would Increase Bureaucracy		Introducing Powiat Would be Too Expensive		Powiat—Better Decisions Because of Better Orientation in Local Needs		Powiat Would Save Public Money		Introducing Powiat Tier Would Bring More Advantages than Disadvantages To My Personal Life (03:1998)	Introducing Powiat Tier Would Bring More Advantages than Disadvantages To the Whole Country (03:1998)
	06.1993	03:1996	03.1998	06.1993	03.1996	03.1998	03.1996	03.1998		
Size of community										
– rural	70	44	52	82	40	50	74	70	47	24
– city <100000	67	41	55	79	38	48	82	76	57	38
– city 100–500000	66	41	61	80	39	53	83	76	49	22
– city >500000	69	35	46	73	38	37	84	80	62	48
Education level										
– primary	62	40	40	77	41	41	73	70	36	25
– vocational	73	43	62	85	40	55	75	70	59	30
– secondary	70	44	58	77	39	50	85	77	55	35
– university	63	30	58	82	27	48	90	89	71	42

SOURCE: CBOS 09/1993, OBOP 03/1996 and 03/1998

As is clear from Table 4.10, support for reform grows together with the growth in the education level. For example, in 1998 the proportion of those believing that *powiat* would save public money among those with a university degree was almost twice as big as among those with only primary education. Similarly, the proportion believing that reform would be good for the country was 25% among those with primary education and 42% among those with university degrees.

Support for *powiat* reform depended also on the size of community. In general, it was lowest in small, rural communities, and highest in the largest cities (over 500 000). However, this rule has one interesting exception; support for reform in cities of 100 000–500 000 is considerably lower than in other cities. The explanation for this phenomenon is relatively simple—since at least 1997, it has been clear that *powiat* reform would be introduced parallel to replacing 49 smaller regions with 10 to 20 larger ones. Among 41 cities with populations of between 100 000 and 500 000, 19 were afraid of losing their status of regional capitals as a result. Not surprisingly, citizens of those cities opposed reforms much more often than did others.

Interestingly enough, many within the same groups claimed that reform would bring harm not only to their personal lives, but also to the whole country. In 1996, when the threat of losing administrative status was neither so close nor so clear, the support for the *powiat* reform in cities of 100 000–500 000 was not lower than elsewhere.

Opinions on the introduction of the regional reform were very similar (see Table 4.11). Public opinion saw both advantages (such as decisions being made closer to the local environment, saving public money, etc.) and disadvantages (more bureaucracy, costs of reform, etc.). The only visible difference between opinions on *powiats* and regions was that *powiats* were more frequently accused of creating more bureaucracy. (Fifty-four percent of such opinions in case of *powiats*, and 44% in case of regions). Also the opinion that “introducing regions will bring more advantages than disadvantages for the whole country” was shared by almost the same number of citizens as it was in case of *powiat* (for regions 33% agreeing and 18% being of opposite opinion). Similarly to the *powiat* reform advantages for respondents’ personal lives were seen more rarely (24%). The pattern of variation (larger support for large regions among educated people and in larger cities with an exception of the 100 000–500 000 population group) was also identical.

Summing up, despite the drop in support since its 1996 peak, most people were still supporting territorial reform in 1998. (See Table 4.12.) In case of a hypothetical *powiat* referendum, 56% would vote for the reform, 34% against, with 10% having no opinion. Support for regional reform was similar (47% for; 29% against) and the only visible difference was a considerably larger proportion of undecideds (24%). The variation according to the size of community and education of respondent repeats a pattern well known from previous studies.

Table 4.11
Opinions on the Regional (*Województwo*) Reform
—Percentage Agreeing with Following Opinions (03/1998)

	Introducing Regional Government is Too Expensive	Regions Would Save Public Money	Introducing Regions Will Bring More Advantages Than Disadvantages to My Personal Life	Introducing Regions will Bring More Advantages Than Disadvantages to the Whole Country
Size of community				
– rural	46	46	17	27
– city <20 000	41	50	28	32
– city 20–100 000	50	63	34	42
– city 100–500 000	55	51	18	28
– city over 500 000	28	61	32	48
Education level				
– primary	40	38	17	25
– vocational	52	53	24	31
– secondary	48	58	26	37
– university	39	72	34	49

SOURCE: OBOP 03/1998

However, this relatively high support (or at least acceptance) for territorial/administrative reform disappeared very quickly after its introduction. (It should be remembered that it was just one of four major reforms introduced by the government at the same time. Numerous mistakes made during their introduction, (along with very poor information-distribution policies), caused support for all four of them to drop steadily. Territorial reform was no exception to this general rule. Figure 4.10 shows that after January 1999, the proportion of respondents convinced that reform was beneficial for their personal lives never reached the pre-reform level, when it was 23% against 16% expressing the opposite opinion.

After reform, the number of those who saw more advantages was usually lower than the number of those who thought that disadvantages were prevailing. According to the last available data (November, 2000) the gap increased to 10%. (Fourteen percent saw more advantages, against 24% who saw mostly disadvantages.) Nevertheless, local government reform is still assessed better than the education and health reforms, and worse only than pension reform.

Table 4.12

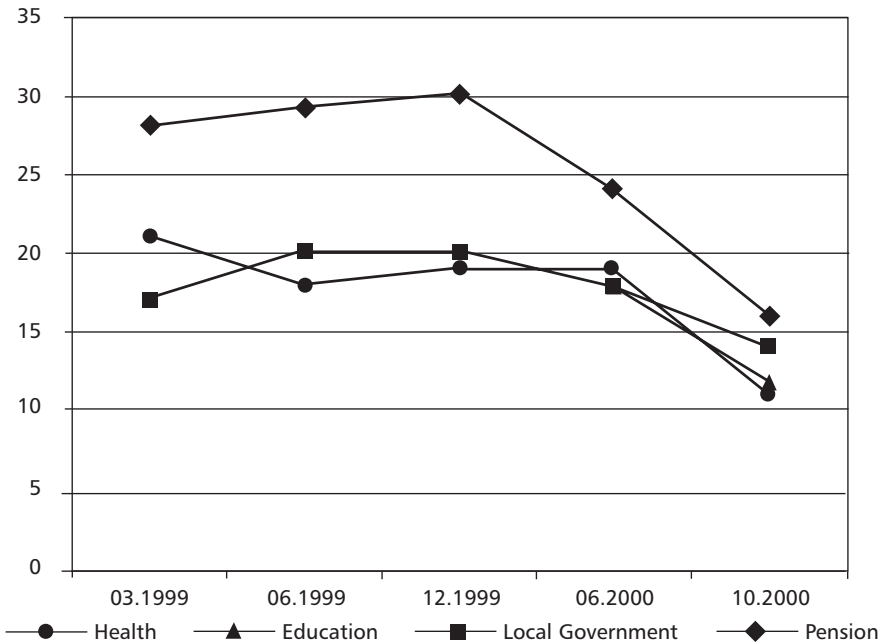
In Case of a Referendum Would You Vote for the Introduction of the *Powiat* and Regional Self-governments [Percentage Answering “Yes”] (March, 1998)

	<i>Powiat</i>	Regions
Size of community		
– Rural	50	48
– city below 20 000		53
– city 20 000–100 000	62	60
– city 100 000–500 000	47	48
– city over 500 000	72	67
Education		
– primary	50	44
– vocational	50	49
– secondary	57	55
– university	75	71

SOURCE: OBOP survey of citizens

Figure 4.10

**Has the Introduction of Following Reforms Been Beneficial to You?
[% of Citizens answering “Yes”]**

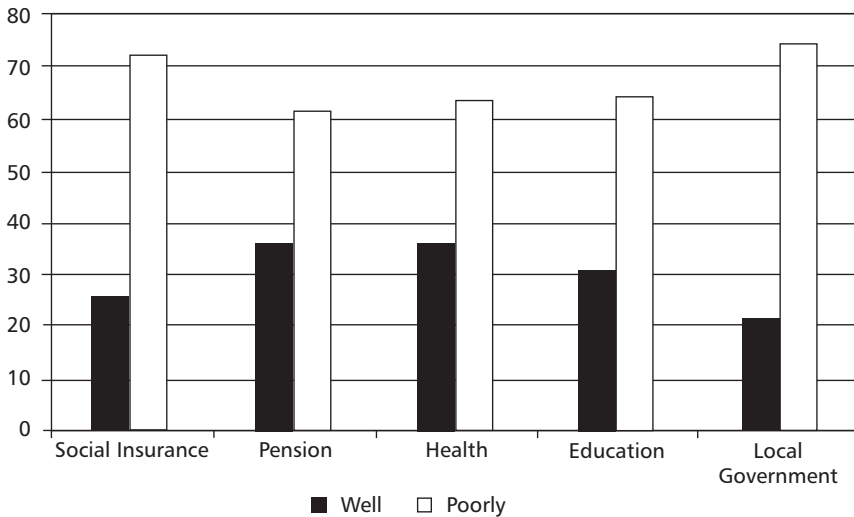


The size of local government does not matter for the assessment of territorial reform, but does have an impact on education. In June 2000, respondents with university degrees were the only group in which the number believing that local governments functioned better than before reform was larger than the number believing the opposite opinion. Among citizens with secondary education, both opinions had the same level of support. Among the less educated, the number thinking that the performance of local governments had worsened was considerably higher.

Figure 4.11 suggests that the lack of sufficient information might be one of the most important reasons for the low level of support for reforms. The number of those insufficiently informed was much larger than those well informed in the case of all of major reforms. But the difference in the case of local government reform was especially high. In June 2000, more than 70% claimed they had insufficient information about territorial reform, while only slightly over one in five declared that they knew enough.

Figure 4.11

**Do You Feel Well Informed About the Following Reforms?
(CBOS Survey of Citizens 06.2000)**



3.4 How Has Public Opinion Influenced Local Government Reform?

Public opinion has never had a major impact on the main milestones of reforms in Poland. They only became a relevant factor once consensus among the “political elite” was reached, or when some group of political proponents was strong enough to push the proposal through the legislation

process. The lack of public opinion impact is well illustrated by the fact that both taking over responsibility for school administration and the introduction of *powiats* took place when public support for these reforms was decreasing. (There are arguments suggesting that support for reforms was decreasing when differences of opinions between politicians were becoming more salient, and that to some extent politicians were able to manipulate public opinion on those issues fairly consistently.)

But this does not mean that we cannot indicate examples of (usually minor) aspects of reforms where public opinion can be shown to have made a difference. The number of *powiats* introduced by the 1998 reforms provides a very good case. Most economic analysts suggested relatively large units be established. Many argued before the relevant legislation was passed that the total number of *powiats* should not exceed 175–200. In a fascinating book—presented as a series of interviews with leading experts and politicians involved in the reform preparation and implementation [Emilewicz, Wołek 2000]—Prof. Michał Kulesza, the main architect of the reform, stated very clearly that he was against such a reduction in a number of units because he expected public opinion to be against it. In fact, even introducing a much larger number of *powiats* (308, plus an additional 65 cities enjoying *powiat* status) did not prevent bitter protests by citizens of another dozen cities with *powiat*-capital ambitions.

Similarly, the initial proposal by the national government to create 12 large regions was replaced by 16 slightly smaller units. Technically speaking, this change was due to complicated political struggles within the national parliament, and between the legislature and the president. But that battle centered around regional forces fighting for regional capital status for their cities [Jałowiecki, 1999]. Those regional activities included active lobbying, street demonstrations, etc.

A separate story is that politicians were much more responsive to very spectacular pressure from a relatively limited number of citizens of potential regional capitals, than to the silent acceptance (for larger regions) of citizens of smaller towns and villages. They were either indifferent to, or may even have actually preferred belonging to regions which would be larger, stronger and have more prestigious capitals. Public opinion surveys clearly suggest that support for at least two “additional” regions, (i.e. introduced when the number was increased from 12 in the original government proposal) regions—lubuski and swietokrzyski—was mostly limited to their potential capitals. Smaller towns and villages often preferred restructuring to becoming part of larger regions.

Perhaps the only reform which was to a large extent influenced by public opinion was an act limiting the salaries of top local government officials (including executive mayors), as well as per diems for local councilors⁵. The beginnings of this reform success story may be traced back to a few years ago, when a journalist in a medium-sized provincial city was refused access to data on the city board salaries. The journalist decided to go to the court asking for a ruling as to whether such information may be declared confidential, (as is generally the case in disclosing salaries), or should be public, since it concerns public functions financed by public money.

The court shared the latter interpretation and the city board had to release the required information. Journalists in other parts of Poland quickly followed this case. Very soon, major newspapers started to publish the rankings of mayors, (and later, marshals of regional offices), with the highest salaries. The information on the highest range of salaries (it should be noted that newspapers for obvious reasons concentrated mostly on the most spectacular cases) was shocking for most of the public, who realized that some mayors were earning much more than the Prime Minister or the President.

This provided a very good occasion for national politicians to initiate relevant reforms, supported by the vast majority of public opinion. Moreover, they could even show that they were reacting to pressure from below. In the survey conducted in March 1999, CBOS discovered that legislation to limit the salaries of local authorities was supported by 90% and opposed by only 4% of the population. This support was only marginally lower in higher-income groups and among younger adults. (But even within these groups, it was well above 80%).

It did not take long for the parliament to prepare relevant draft legislation. (A cynic might say that it was easy, since MPs were not discussing limiting of their own salaries but salaries of local mayors and councilors). Despite some obvious negative side-effects of the new Law, none of the parties represented in parliament decided to vote against it, and support for the Law was almost unanimous.

4. CITIZENS AND LOCAL DECISION MAKING —DO THEY HAVE A CHANCE TO MAKE AN IMPACT?

4.1 How Local Governments Learn About Citizen's Perceptions?—The Mayors' Point of View

At the beginning of this section, we tried to answer what mayors were thinking. Did they truly want to know citizens' preferences? And how did they try to learn about citizens' views? According to an LDI 2 survey, Polish mayors think that "being informed about citizens' views" is one of two of their most important duties, together with "procuring financial resources for the community". Among 15 options, this task was selected as most important by 25% of respondents, and as second most important by 9%. "Procuring resources" was indicated as most important by 22%, and as second most important by another 24%.

Among the three next most frequently mentioned options, there is one more that relates to citizen participation in local governance—"encourage residents to be active in public affairs", the most important of which were: "to implement electoral programs" and "to concentrate on long-term development strategies". There is more evidence that mayors think that being in touch with ordinary citizens is very important. As many as 93% agreed with the statement that "every

mayor should find time to talk to citizens, even if it takes them away from other pressing tasks”. More than three-quarters of mayors agreed that “active involvement of residents between elections is important in order to make local democracy work in my municipality”. The agreement on issues mentioned above was almost equally common in local governments of various sizes and geographical locations.

At the same time, many mayors agreed that “many councilors quickly lose touch with ordinary citizens”. Thirty-eight percent of respondents agreed with this statement, while slightly less—35% - disagreed. The number of mayors who believed that “councilors often lose touch” outsourced those believing in good contacts between representatives and local populations in towns of over 10 000. In communities between 5 000 and 10 000, the proportion agreeing and disagreeing is about the same, while communities below 5 000 are the only category in which the number of mayors believing in good contacts as a top priority prevail.

There are number of ways in which a mayor can learn the views of citizens. In the LDI 2 questionnaire, respondents assessed the importance of ten possible methods. According to the survey’s results, the two most important methods were seen as “organized meetings” and “personal contacts with citizens”.

When asked to choose the most important method, over half the mayors selected “meetings” and over one-third “personal contacts” (next in rank—“office hours”—was mentioned by 3% only). A similar pattern was repeated in all population centers having up to 20 000 residents. The larger the city, the less important organized meetings were seen as being, and the more important personal contacts were. Knowing the nature of much of social life in bigger Polish agglomerations, we can assume that these answers mean that organized meetings are not felt to be very important, and “personal contacts” are in fact limited to a relatively quite narrow group of friends, colleagues and neighbors.

Figure 4.12 allows for a few additional remarks on the specific pattern of learning about citizens’ views towards large local governments. Together with the increase in size, the importance of indirect communications sources— such as local newspapers, local organizations, political parties, and family and friends— increases noticeably.

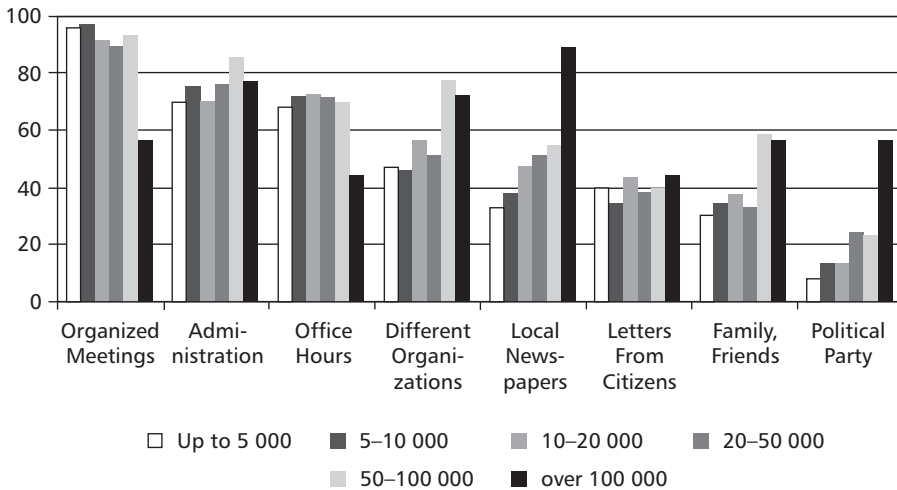
As explained above, local mayors think that learning about citizens’ preferences is very important for their job. But to what extent do they do this in practice, and do they really know how to learn effectively?

In 1999, over 200 mayors were asked what they were doing in order to improve the way citizens were served by local administrations.⁶ The results of this open-ended question suggest that mayors either had very limited knowledge of various techniques aimed at listening to local public opinion, or that the high attention placed on knowing citizens’ preferences was just a verbal declaration. Trying to improve local administration functioning, most mayors concentrated almost exclusively

on technical improvements (e.g., using computers, training local staff, etc.). If improving communications between town hall and citizens was mentioned, it usually focused on the flow of information from local authorities to the general public, not the other way around. Less than 10% of interviewed mayors indicated activities focused on learning citizens' preferences, such as: regular registration of citizens' suggestions, regular meetings of councilors and town boards with citizens, surveys of local public opinion, etc.

Figure 4.12

**What Are the Most Important Sources of Information on Citizens Opinions?
(Mayors' Answers—1997, Percentages of Important + Very Important)**



What is the result of the process of learning of citizens' needs and preferences? Do citizens think that local authorities know their needs? The results of a USAID LGPP survey shed some light on this issue. Forty-seven percent of respondents agreed that "local authorities know citizens' needs", while 31% were of the opposite opinion. Taking into account that local governments surveyed by the USAID were probably much more innovative than would be the case nationally, the results quoted—although not disastrous—were not very impressive.

4.2 Do Local Governments Translate Knowledge of Citizen's Perception into Local Decision Making? (And if So, How?)

The opinions expressed by some mayors about taking into account citizens' views while making decisions are often ambivalent and not always coherent. When asked about people whose opinions they felt it was important to consider when making decisions, 79% felt "all inhabitants in the

municipality” were important or very important. Such answers were also found in local governments of all sizes. At the same time, 39% of mayors agree that “local politics are often so complicated that local residents can’t really understand what they are all about”. Only 27% disagreed with this statement.

To complicate the picture of mayors’ opinions even more, we should remember that 76% of mayors surveyed believe that the active involvement of residents between elections is important for local democracy. But 30% agree that “voting is the only way that local residents can have a say in what happens in local politics”. (Only slightly more—37%—do not agree with this statement).

Last but not least, 46% believe that “an average citizen has more influence on the way a municipality is run now than three years ago”, while only 5% believe citizens’ influence has decreased. All of those answers provide us with neither a fully logical, nor a coherent pattern. We may only suspect that answers to some questions (“involvement of citizens is important”, “citizens’ influence increases”) are verbal declarations reflecting willingness to be “politically correct”, while some others (“local politics is too complicated”, etc.) reflect the existence of a more elitist style of local politics and policy-making.

4.2.1 Public Attitudes Regarding Political Representation

What do citizens think about whose interests are most vigorously pursued by local councilors and local authorities in general?

At the beginning of 1992, a majority of voters claimed local authorities mainly took care of their own interests [Swianiewicz, Bukowski, 1992]. The next most frequent type of opinion suggested local politicians were steered by local lobbying groups. Only slightly more than one in five voters believed that taking into account their electorate’s needs was a priority of elected officials.

In June 1993, the situation was somewhat better—the proportion of those believing in *pro publico bono* motivation slightly increased, while the number of those claiming purely selfish motives sharply dropped (CBOS survey). The proportion believing in local councilors being concerned by the needs of the general public was much higher in small communities than in big cities. In the latter case, a considerable proportion believed that local authorities represented their own political parties first and last. (Further details are provided in Table 4.13.)

Table 4.13
Whose Interests are Most Often Pursued by Local Councillors in Your Municipality? [Percentage]

	All citizens			Their own		Their political party		Lobbying groups		Don't know	
	02.1992	06.1993	01.2000(*)	02.1992	06.1993	02.1992	06.1993	02.1992	06.1993	02.1992	06.1993
Total	22	24	47	29	19	NA	15	25	10	32	22
- rural community	34	37	48	NA	15	NA	3	NA	10	NA	24
- city up to 20 000	NA	22	51	NA	18	NA	9	NA	18	NA	25
- city 20-100 000	NA	17	46	NA	23	NA	21	NA	10	NA	20
- city 100-500 000	15	15	49	NA	21	NA	24	NA	5	NA	22
- city over 500 000		9	42	NA	23	NA	35	NA	8	NA	18

SOURCE: Swianiewicz, Bukowski 02/1992, CBOS 06/93, 01/2000

(*) Note: the question asked in 2000 was not fully comparable. Respondents did not choose from various options, but rather were asked whether “ they thought there are people who take care of the interests of people like them in local governments”.

People with less formal education more often believe in *pro publico bono* motivations (in 1993—23% with primary and 30% with vocational education, compared to 11% of those with university degrees). Similarly, the strongest overall belief in local governments' acting in the interest of most citizens is among respondents lower income levels (in 1993—36% in the lowest income group against 18% in the highest income group).

Unfortunately, we do not have fully comparable data from recent surveys. However, the opportunity to analyze the trend of changes offered a slightly different question.

In October 1989, (just before the first local government reform), in June 1993 and in January 2000, CBOS surveys included the question: “do you think that, in local authorities, there are people who take care of the interests of people like you?”. Instead of choosing among different options and indicating whose interests are taken into account “first of all”, respondents were only able to give simple “yes” or “no” answers.

The results of these surveys were relatively upbeat for the principles of local government. In 1989, the pattern of answers was strongly negative for local authorities—28% said “yes” and almost twice as many (47%) “no”. In the 1993 survey, 41% answered “yes”, 32% “no” and 27% had no opinion. The 2000 results were also significantly better—47% said “yes”, 41% “no” and 12% “don't know”

Moreover, the number of “yes” was larger than “no” answers in all communities, regardless of the size, education or economic status of those surveyed. This belief in the representation of common people's interests by local governments was much higher than in the case of regional governments (34%), the national government (32%), or parliament (32%).

4.2.2 Attitudes Regarding Political Influence

Citizens' opinions on their own influence are consistently much clearer (and more pessimistic) than those expressed by mayors, although the trend of changes is positive. In 1992, when asked about influence on the way their municipality is run, 85% declared they had no influence; 14% said they had little influence and only 1% assessed their influence as significant [Swianiewicz, Bukowski 1992]. As illustrated by Table 4.14, feelings of having real influence were much higher among those with university education, in smaller local governments, and among respondents with higher than average incomes.

In 1999, the number of those believing they influenced local policies increased to 25%, and in 2000 to 31%. However, the number of those feeling they had little influence was still much larger (73% in 1999 and 67% in 2000). As was the case before, the feeling of influence is higher among people with higher education than among those with only primary formal learning.

Similarly, the feeling of having influence is still much more common in small rural communities than in cities. In 2000, the difference between feelings of influence in small and large communities was considerably smaller than in 1992 or 1999. But it is still too early to determine whether this change has begun a new trend. As one may expect, the feeling of influence is also higher among respondents with higher incomes, although the relationship is not very strong, (and is, in fact, much weaker than it was at the beginning of the transition period).

Table 4.14
Citizens' Feelings of Influence on Local Matters

	January 1992		June 1999		January 2000	
	"Yes"	"No"	"Yes"	"No"	"Yes"	"No"
Total	15	85	25	73	31	67
Size						
– rural	20	80	33	65	36	61
– city below 20 000	16	84	25	71	32	67
– city 20 000–100 000	13	87	20	79	29	70
– city 100 000–500 000	12	88	18	77	26	71
– city over 500 000			18	81	30	70
Income per capita*						
– below 275 PLN	14	86	24	74	28	72
– 276–399	13	87	18	80	30	69
– 400–549	28	72	26	74	31	66
– 550–799	31	69	20	76	26	72
– over 799	33	67	28	69	40	58
Education						
– primary	9	91	22	73	21	76
– vocational	13	87	24	74	31	68
– secondary	19	81	26	73	36	63
– university	26	74	32	67	47	50

SOURCES: 1992—Bukowski, Swianiewicz; June, 1999, January, 2000—CBOS

* 1992 income categories were different (up to 100, 100–150, 150–200, 200–300 and over 300 New Polish Zloty).

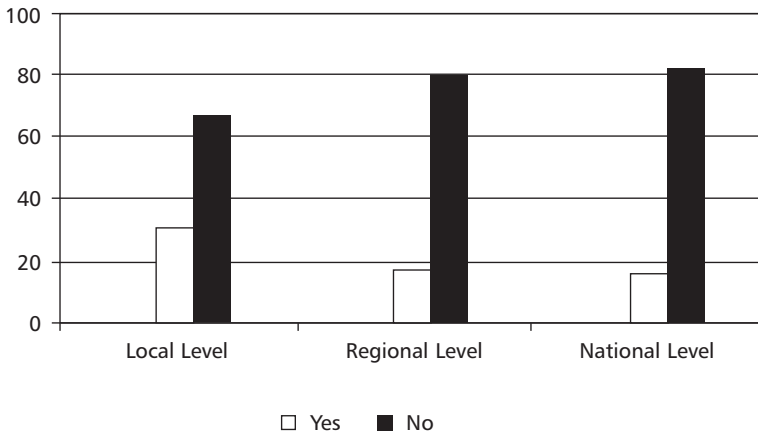
It is characteristic that the feeling of being able to influence local policies, although not yet very common, is much more widespread than the feeling of influence on regional or national policies. In 2000, only 17% of citizens thought they had any influence on regional policies, and only

16% on policies important for the whole country (up from 11% in 1999). The more positive answers in small communities are characteristic for local issues only; the feeling of influence on regional and national matters is usually larger in large cities.

Citizens' opinions on influence of local, regional and national matters are summarized in Table 4.14 and Figure 4.13

Figure 4.13

Do You Think That People Like You Have an Impact on Important Issues on a Municipal, Regional, National Level? (CBOS Survey of Citizens, 2000)



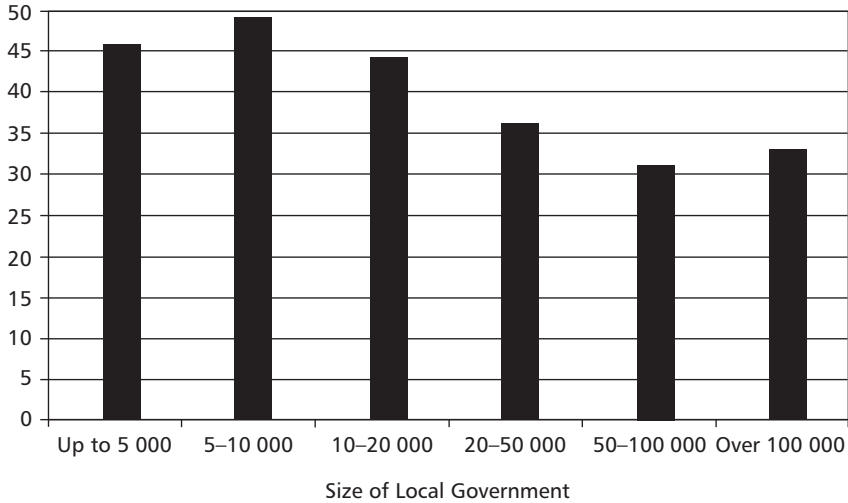
4.2.3 Forms of Communication

Local referenda

The large proportion of mayors surveyed in the 1997 LDI 2 survey agreed that important local issues should be decided in local referenda. Such an opinion was expressed by 45% of respondents, while 29% of mayors opposed it. As shown in Figure 4.14, proponents of referenda prevail in small local governments (i.e., smaller than 20 000 in population). In mid-size ones (20 000–50 000 in population) the number of proponents and opponents is equal, while in larger cities mayoral support for referenda is much lower. That is somewhat surprising, since these are large cities in which assessing constituent's opinions between elections are normally quite difficult. One might surmise that these local governments should be especially interested in learning about citizens' preferences in a more direct way.

Figure 4.14

**Do You Agree That Important Local Issues Should Be Decided by Referendum?
(Mayors' Opinions—Percentage "Agree" + "Generally Agree", 1997)**



The Law on Local Government allows for the organization of referenda, but it also indicates two situations in which referenda would be obligatory:

- Introducing additional local tax (so called “self-taxation” of citizens), and,
- Dissolving a local council before the end of its term.

For other issues, a referendum might be called by a *gmina* council or after a citizens’ initiative. The initiation of the referendum by citizens requires written declaration by at least 10% of eligible voters. Validating any referendum requires at least a 30% turnout.

There are precise data available about referenda aimed at dissolving a local council. Between 1992 and the middle of 2000, over 220 such referenda were held. This means that they occurred in almost one in ten *gmina*. A more precise analysis suggests three conclusions:

- As presented in Table 4.15, the frequency of referenda gradually increased over time. In 1992, there were only 23, and until 2000 their annual number was below 35. But between January and June 2000, there were over 70 referenda aimed at the termination of local council’s terms. It is difficult to say whether this was a result of increasing disappointment with local government activities, (the data presented in section 2.4. do not indicate such an increase), or perhaps because of better organization of opposition groups who are more and more efficient in mobilizing local communities.

- Recent referenda have been successful more often, (i.e., have led to dissolving councils, and thereby to new elections). In previous years, only between one in eight and one in ten referenda were successful. But in 2000, this rose to one in six. Between January and June 2000, referenda lead to the dissolving of the same number of councils as during the eight previous years put together.
- Until recently, such referenda were organized mostly in small and mid-size towns and cities—but not so much in the biggest agglomerations (where mobilization of large electorate is difficult), nor in rural communities. However, since the 1998 elections, this tendency has changed. Recent referenda against councils have been more frequent in rural areas.

Table 4.15
Number of Referenda to Dissolve Local Councils

	Total		Urban and Mixed (Urban–Rural) Local Governments		Rural Communities	
	Referenda	Successful	Referenda	Successful	Referenda	Successful
1992	23	0	13	0	10	0
1993	25	3	12	2	13	1
1994*	4	0	0	0	4	0
1995	34	1	27	1	7	0
1996	31	5	15	0	16	5
1997	33	3	17	3	16	0
1998*	0	0	0	0	0	0
1999*	10	3	2	1	8	2
2000**	72	12	28	3	44	9

* during 1994, 1998, and 1999 because of restrictions on referenda before and after local elections, legal possibilities to organize such referenda were very limited.

** January–June 2000 only

SOURCE: National Office for Elections (*Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze*)

The regional distribution of referenda to dissolve local councils has been very uneven. Since 1998, the most frequent have been referenda in the northeastern region (*warmińsko-mazurskie*), which has seen referenda held in almost one in ten *gmina*. The same is true to a slightly lesser extent for the western regions (*dolnośląskie* and *zachodniopomorskie*). On the other extreme,

there are regions in mid-western (*wielkopolskie, opolskie*) and southeastern (*malopolskie, podkarpackie*) Poland where such referenda were very seldom held. It has become increasingly clear in recent years that attempts at early termination of local councils' terms occur least often in regions with the highest turnouts, the most stable populations and the longest traditions of self-organization.

Unfortunately, precise statistics on other types of Polish local referenda are not available, but—despite many mayors' verbal support for the principle of a referendum such as the one quoted above—they are certainly less frequent than those aimed at dissolving local councils. Without any firm statistics, we can also say that the most typical local referenda have been dealing with:

- “Self-taxation” of the local population. There have been several cases in which local voters have decided through a referendum to pay additional taxes in order to improve the quality of household waste collections. Regulski (2000) provides a description of the first such referendum, organized in 1991 in the rural *gmina* of Pobiedziska. The turnout in that referendum was 56%, with 76% of voters approving self-taxation for improvement of waste collection;
- Location of controversial investments, such as solid waste disposal plants. Some referenda were organized to block the new investment, others to confirm approval for the contract signed between the close city and a suburban rural *gmina*, which agreed to the location of any plant within its territory.
- Division of a *gmina* into two (or more) separate local governments, and,
- Exerting pressure on national government to change planned regional or *powiat* borders during the 1998/99 regional reforms.

Decentralization within local government

The Polish *gmina* system, being relatively large, provides ample opportunities for decentralization within local government. This concerns both rural communities, where decentralization of some decisions to individual villages could have place and big cities that might be divided into smaller districts (boroughs). The Act on Municipal Governments provides a space for such a decentralization into so-called “auxiliary units”. Their existence and powers depend almost exclusively on the *gmina* (municipal) council. Such decentralization can significantly broaden the number of citizens involved in decision making on local public issues.

In rural areas, there is a very long tradition of limited forms of self-government led by the popularly elected village head (*soltyś*). However, although village and district councils exist in almost all local governments, municipal councils are usually reluctant to transfer any considerable amount of discretionary authority to them. Nevertheless, there have been some examples of innovations in this respect, both in big cities and in small, rural communities.

The city of Krakow provides one of the most interesting examples of such a decentralization policy within a big city. The Krakow City Council decided to divide the city into 18 districts.

They have been given discretion to decide upon certain functions including:

- Repairs in primary schools, kindergartens and nurseries;
- Repairs of local roads, pavements and street lighting;
- Modernization of playgrounds;
- Taking care of local green areas, and,
- Overseeing local cultural events.

The city council must also approve rules related to the stable method of financing decentralized functions. A separate resolution by the Krakow council created a stable framework for support of small investment projects, such as construction and modernization of water and sewage systems, initiated by neighborhood groups.

The role of village self-governments is usually larger than that of auxiliary units in the urban areas, but the National Association of Village Heads (*Krajowe Stowarzyszenie Soltysow*) is a relatively influential lobbying group. It is quite common that many rural local governments leave some small portion of their investment budget at individual villages' disposal.

A very good example of far-going decentralization in rural areas can be provided by the rural *gmina* of Brzeg in the Opole region, which has even decided to transfer part of its communal property to individual villages [Zell, 2001]. Villages in this *gmina* are allowed to keep part of local budget revenues (100% in the case of taxes on agriculture), and are responsible for some services such as transport of their children to local schools, local street lighting and maintenance of local roads.

Other forms of communication

There are some other forms of communication between local authorities and citizens which are prescribed by the law and which as a consequence provide a channel for citizens to influence local decision making. The most important forms of such communication include:

- Obligatory consultations over some local legal acts, including land use plans. They need to be held well before the council can formally approve them, so that any interested citizen has occasion to submit questions, protests etc.
- According to the Law on Local Government, council meetings are open to the public so citizens may participate in them and be updated about council plans and decisions.
- Regulations on meetings of the council committees are not so clear, and it happens quite often that their meetings are closed to the public⁸. On the other hand, the Law allows that up to 50% of committee members may be recruited from outside of the council. This clause is frequently used and in that way the forum of discussion of important decisions is widened.

- The Local Government Act states that “a councilor is obliged to represent his/her voters, to be in touch with citizens and their organizations, and to listen to their opinions and to pass them to local authorities”. The Act does not precisely state the form of these contacts, but the practice of nearly all local governments is that councilors have official, regular hours during which they are available for citizens. Also, mayors tend to have a few hours every week during which they are available for individual meetings with citizens.
- Both the Local Government Act and the Public Finance Act state that “local government finance is open to public scrutiny”. This means that budgets and other important decisions concerning local finance must be publicly announced.

(It is a commonly held opinion that regulations concerning availability of information on public authorities’ activities are not precise enough and there are plans to adopt a special law on public access to government information.)

Other forms of communication—such as public opinion polls, public meetings and hearings, mail boxes, etc.—, are not obligatory. Although they are all used by local governments, it is impossible to find statistics which would show how popular individual methods are. We can only provide some examples from local governments who are especially active in this field. Interesting cases are provided in the report summarizing the relevant experiences of municipalities involved in the USAID Local Government Partnership Program [Wiktorowska, 2000]. One of the most comprehensive programs of communication has been developed in the towns of Namysłów in southern Poland and Nowa Dęba in southeastern Poland. The program includes, for example, the following elements:

- Preparation of the catalogue of services provided by local government (both printed and website versions);
- Improvement of the system of information for citizens through the posted notices and information points;
- Regular meetings of councilors with voters;
- Regular meetings of the mayor with neighborhood groups and with various professional groups;
- Special telephone lines to executive board members;
- Monthly local television broadcasts with the opportunity for citizens to ask questions by telephone;
- Improvement in communications with local media;
- Surveys of citizens’ opinions;
- A survey consultation of budget proposals, together with a program of local investments;
- A survey of citizens satisfaction with the way they have been treated by local authorities;

- Regular analysis of articles discussing the issues of town of Namysów in the local and regional press;
- Mail-boxes in the town hall and central locations within the town, and,
- Intensification of consultations with local NGOs.

The last item is worthy of broader comment. An intensification of co-operation with local NGOs is worth separate mentioning. Before 1990, the number of NGOs existing in Poland and the scope of their activities were extremely limited. In 1989, the number of foundations (one of two basic forms for NGOs organizations in Poland) was 277, while in 1996 their number increased to almost 6 000 [Wygnański, 1998].

Co-operation with NGOs in providing many vital services (mostly in the social services area) has clearly become a new trend in many local governments during the last few years. The first complex program of co-operation was launched in Gdynia in 1995. Between 1993 and 1996, the proportion of NGOs receiving support from local governments increased from 16% to 29% [Regulski, 2000]. An increasing number of politicians are aware that many tasks may be provided by NGOs better and cheaper than by local government in-house service delivery units. However, despite this very clear trend, good co-operation with NGOs is still proof of an innovative approach, rather than the rule concerning most local governments.

The other means of communication worthy of separate mentioning is the increasing use of the Internet by local governments. Among 326 cities having the status of regional or county capital, there is not a single one which does not have a website. (This is quite frequent among smaller towns, as well.) Very few of them are operated by commercial companies; the vast majority are operated by local administrations themselves.

The shape and graphic form of websites vary from very simple to extremely rich and sophisticated. Most of them focus on providing up-to-date information for potential investors or tourists. For example, on the web-site of the winter resort of Krynica, one can check daily information on weather forecasts, snowfalls and skiing conditions on all major ski-lifts, as well as accessing a rich data base on available accommodation.

However, on most cities' web sites, there are also examples of information addressed at citizens, such as precise descriptions of services, downloadable forms and experiments with collecting feedback from citizens through the internet. This means of communication is certainly very promising. But although the situation may change rapidly in the near future, one should notice that presently only a small minority of citizens state that they use the internet as a source of information on their local government activities (see Table 4.17).

Most citizens agree that local authorities try to inform them about activities being undertaken. In a June 1996 OBOP survey, 53% of respondents expressed such an opinion, while the opposite

opinion was shared by 31%. What are the most important sources of information for local citizens? This was investigated by the USAID LGPP survey conducted in 1999 and 2000 of ten local governments.

As can be seen in Table 4.16, the most frequent sources are press publications. (About 58% of citizens claimed to have used these at least once). The second most frequent source of information for citizens were meetings with councilors or with members of municipal executive boards (about 25%). Other sources of information are used by a relatively small percentage of citizens. Employees

Table 4.16
Frequency of Information Sources

Did you use any of the following sources of information during the last year?	Percentages of responses "once" + "twice" + "more than twice"					
	Citizens		NGOs		Businesses	
	1999	2000	1999	2000	1999	2000
1. Press publications regarding municipal affairs	58.2	58.7	NA	NA	NA	NA
2. Meetings with councilors, members of the executive board	27.2	25.0	61.6	60.6	32.0	42.1
3. Open meetings organized by the municipal office	24.1	22.8	62.7	60.2	27.9	33.9
4. Budget presentations for the next year	17.2	12.6	45.7	35.5	27.2	26.4
5. Announcements, minutes or protocols of council meetings	14.9	13.2	47.6	39.8	19.4	26.8
6. Formal council meetings	13.1	12.9	41.1	42.5	15.0	20.9
7. Municipal information center	11.0	8.7	22.4	31.1	12.3	16.9
8. Surveys conducted by local government	10.3	13.5	11.0	24.6	13.0	20.1
9. Press conferences	NA	NA	18.7	16.9	11.2	12.2
10. Meetings of council committees	9.0	7.7	32.9	30.8	10.9	10.3
11. Regular meetings (meetings, dinners, trips and/or mutual visits)	NA	NA	29.4	26.2	9.2	18.9

SOURCE: USAID LGPP survey of 10 local governments

NOTE: Number of respondents: 1999—NGOs n = 211, Business n = 294, Citizens n = 2 531; 2000—NGOs n = 257, Business n = 254, Citizens n = 1,240

of NGOs declared a much more frequent use of all sources as compared to average citizens. As compared to other two groups (citizens and local businessman), employees of NGOs rely mostly on the official channels of information disseminated via the local town hall.

This pattern of information sources is not very different from the one described in 1993 by the CBOS survey. According to it, the most common sources of information on local government activity were: private contacts with friends and colleagues (78%); local print media (56%); local/regional television programs (42%); public announcements of local governments (35%), and organized meetings with councilors (15%).

The separate set of questions asked in the LGPP questionnaire allowed for the identification of the relative strength of different media at local governments' disposal (see Table 4.17). Clearly, the most powerful media is local press. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported that they gained relevant information "often" or "very often" via this channel. Several other sources, (i.e., local radio; material distributed by local government; conversations with council members; conversations with office clerks and authorities; open meetings; the internet, etc.) are used rather seldom. More than of 86% of citizens declared they used these channels "seldom" or "very seldom".

Table 4.17
Evaluation of Media Usage Frequency

I Learn About Local Government Activities from...	Median	Very Seldom	Seldom	Some-times	Often	Very Often
1. Local press	1.9	17.6	18.1	28.1	26.0	10.2
2. Local TV	1.2	38.8	20.6	23.5	13.8	3.4
3. Bulletin boards	1.0	47.1	21.9	20.4	8.8	1.9
4. Local radio	0.8	57.5	19.6	13.5	6.6	2.9
5. Information materials distributed by local government	0.8	57.0	18.7	14.7	7.5	2.1
6. Conversations with council members	0.5	75.4	11.1	8.2	3.7	1.6
7. Conversations with office clerks and authorities	0.5	68.4	15.1	11.3	3.6	1.6
8. Open meetings	0.3	80.4	10.4	6.5	2.1	0.7
9. Internet	0.0	94.3	3.5	1.2	0.5	0.4

SOURCE: USAID LGPP survey of 10 local governments

Analyses based on USAID LGPP survey revealed a positive correlation between the evaluation of the local government office and the declared level of being informed. This correlation stayed fairly constant, even when we factored in varying individuals' perceptions of their own economic wellbeing. In short; the more informed people felt, the higher they rated their local government, regardless of their economic situation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

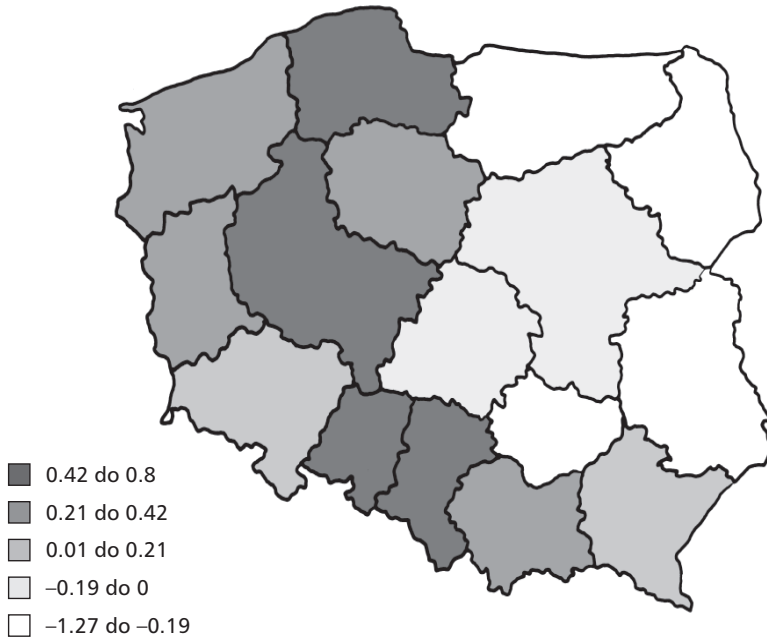
What is the overall picture of relationships between local authorities in Poland and the general public? The most important findings may be summarized in the following points:

- *Variations between small and large administrative units.* Local governments vary significantly from one another. There is a very clear pattern of differences between rural communities and small towns on the one hand, and large cities on the other. Citizens in small communities hold much better overall opinions about their local governments—they generally trust them, and are more often satisfied with their activities. They also feel better informed and are more widely involved in local public issues (this includes more frequent participation in local elections). But on the other hand, public opinion in larger cities supports further decentralization much more often than people in small communities. This finding has been confirmed by several analysis: inhabitants of bigger communities more frequently support transfer of new functions to local governments, they also supported introduction of *powiat* and regional self-governments much more widely than people from small towns and rural areas.
- *Regional patterns.* In issues on which we have regional variation data available—i.e., turnout in local elections; turnover of mayors; opinions on corruption in local government, opinions on the way customers have been treated by city hall, etc.—better results have been noted in regions with more civic traditions and better developed civic society (south-eastern and mid-western Poland) than in those in central, eastern, or northern Poland. It is worth noticing that regional variation in citizens' attitudes is very close to regional variations in the actual performance of local government administration. This variation, based on recent research) is presented in the map on Figure 4.15 [Swianiewicz, 2000].
- *The impact of education.* Public opinion also differs depending on the level of education. In general, those with university education are of a much better opinion on local government activity. They trust local authorities more and they support further decentralization of the state more often. But they are also more critical—they more often are aware (or afraid of) corruption on a local level. (They also more often suspect that not all councilors always try to act in the interest of the general public.)
- *Changes over time.* What has been the dominant pattern of change in public opinion regarding local governments during the last decade? First, there was a dramatic improvement in the level of trust and in the level of satisfaction with local governments' activities shortly

after the radical decentralization reforms of 1990. The pattern of public opinion has remained relatively stable since then. However, we can definitely identify some issues on which we have observed slow, stable improvement in public opinion throughout the whole decade.

Figure 4.15

Institutional Performance of Polish Local Government Administration—Summary Index



SOURCE: P. Swianiewicz (2000)

A slow improvement in citizens' feelings of influence on local public issues and a slowly increasing belief that local councilors are taking into account interests of "normal people" provide just two examples of this positive trend. A constantly increasing fear of corruption in local governments is the only identified example of a negative change in the public attitude.

As regards opinions on decentralization the opinion of general public has been fluctuating. It seems that the top support could be found in the 1995–96 period, with a drop of enthusiasm for further decentralization after this period. 1995–96 was also a pick of positive opinion on some other issues. It was a moment of the highest general level of trust in local governments, the

opinion on local corruption started to significantly worsen since then, as well. It seems that the same period marked the end of the “honeymoon” in the general picture of local governments in the national press, radio and television. In the first half of the nineties there were many critical articles or TV programs on individual local governments, but the general opinion on the decentralization reform was almost always very positive. In the second half of the decade, the overall “tone” of media became more diversified. The question of whether the change of media picture influenced some aspects of the public opinion or vice versa is very difficult to answer and reminds a type of “chicken and the egg” dilemma.

The general pictures presented in this chapter suggests that people in Poland trust local government relatively often, and are relatively satisfied with its overall activities. At the same time, they do not think local government is very important for their everyday lives. They are not very interested in learning about local government activities, and are also not very willing to be active in local public issues. In CBOS’s year 2000 survey, only 22% of respondents responded positively to the question: “during the last few years, have you ever tried to do something for the benefit of your community, district, village, or town?”. Most of these positive questions related to activities undertaken for small neighborhood groups. Such positive answers were given by respondents with higher education much more often (43%) than by those with primary education only (12%).

Taking the risk of some oversimplification, this picture might be summarized as an sympathetic disengagement—most people like decentralization, but do not care very much about local governments, do not think of it as very important for their everyday lives, and prefer to stay almost entirely uninvolved.

One may suspect that this situation is quite convenient for many local politicians. There are not too many signs that they try to involve the general public in public issues and the general decision-making process. Obviously, there are exemptions to this rule (some of them described previously in this chapter). But despite verbal declarations on the importance of forging closer links with voters, for most local authorities, communication with the public is seen as a one-way street—local authorities try to take steps to inform the general public, but learning about public preferences does not seem equally important.

The two stages of decentralization reform—namely, the 1990 introduction of local self-government on a municipal level and the 1998-99 introduction of *powiat* and regional tiers of self-government—were introduced from above by politicians pushed by the influential groups of experts. This does not mean, however, that decentralization was not supported by the public during these times. On the contrary, citizens’ opinions, although fluctuating, have usually been in favor of reforms. But with very few concrete examples of how these might work, there was no strong grassroots pressure demanding changes in the local government system.

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MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION USED IN THIS CHAPTER

CBOS (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej—Public Opinion Research Center) bulletins—based on representative sample of a given adult population. (Usually, the sample size is 1 000–1 500 respondents).

OBOP (Ocerodek Badania Opinii Publicznej—Tailor Nelson Sofres OBOP Public Opinion Research Center) bulletins—based on representative sample of adult population (usually the sample size is 1 000–1 500 respondents).

LDI survey—survey of mayors in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia organized in 1997 as a part of Research Project Local Democracy and Innovation. The Project was sponsored by the Norwegian Government and co-ordinated by Harald Baldersheim from the University of Bergen. The Polish sample involved 521 respondents.

USAID–LGPP survey—survey of 10 municipalities involved in the USAID Local Government Partnership Project, conducted in 1999 and 2000. The size of sample: for citizens—2 531 respondents, for local businessman—294, for NGOs representatives—211.

P. Swianiewicz, J. Bukowski (1992)—survey of over 1200 citizens ordered in February 1992 by “Wspólnota”—weekly local government newspaper. Data quoted in this chapter has been taken from the Swianiewicz, Bukowski paper describing results of the survey.

NOTES

- ¹ Questionnaire organised in 1997 in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia as part of the international research project “Local Democracy and Innovation” co-ordinated by the University of Bergen and sponsored by the Norwegian government. This source of data is further referred to as “LDI 2”.
- ² This topic is discussed in far greater detail in Swianiewicz (2000).
- ³ I want to express my gratitude to Viktor Wekselberg; a consultant working for the USAID LGPP Program, for providing information on results of the survey organised in 1999 and 2000 in 10 municipalities involved in the USAID project. I have also used Victor Wekselberg’s comments regarding the results of this survey. (One has to be aware that these localities are not representative for the whole country—local authorities involved in the project were usually interested in improving their communication skills more than the average local government. Therefore, one may expect a possible positive bias; i.e. the findings may report better communication between local government authorities and citizens than happens in an average Polish community).

- ⁴ Below, I refer to the survey of over 3000 citizens conducted in November–December 1999 by CBOS and December 1999 postal survey of owners of small local firms, in which over 600 businessmen responded. For details, see: P. Swianiewicz (2000).
- ⁵ Theoretically, being a councillor is not actually a “paid” job. But councillors have a right to small per diems as compensation for their time, costs of transport, etc. At the beginning of the nineties, these per diems were usually quite small. (In one Warsaw borough, they were just slightly over the cost of lunch in a city hall restaurant—a lunch which councillors could eat during the break in their meeting.) But these per diems were gradually increasing in some local governments, reaching a level well exceeding an average public sector wage.
- ⁶ A survey of 208 mayors ordered by the Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics and conducted by the Polish Sociological Association in Autumn 1999 as a part of research on institutional performance of local government administration [see Swianiewicz, 2000].
- ⁷ Both 1999 and 2000 data refer to CBOS surveys. The formulation of questions was not identical, (in 1992—“Do you feel you can influence the way your municipality is run?” in 1999 and 2000—“Do you think people like you influence important issues in your municipality?”)—but close enough to allow for comparisons.
- ⁸ Only an April 2001 amendment to the Gmina Government Act changed this situation, deciding that all council committee’s meetings need to be publicly available. The same amendment made membership of non-councillors in the committees impossible.

Public Perception of Local Government in Slovakia

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, highly independent local governments in towns and villages throughout Slovakia were established. The process of decentralisation of power is still incomplete, so de facto regional self-government does not yet exist in Slovakia. Public administration reform in 1996 only addressed the state administration on regional and sub-regional (i.e, district) levels.

It is possible to categorise local self-government into four types:

- villages—by law, each village must have its own local government
- towns—at present, there are 136 towns in Slovakia
- sections of towns—districts within the two biggest Slovak towns Bratislava and Košice have their own local governments which share their competencies with the local government of the town of which they are part.
- capital city, Bratislava and second-largest city, Košice—special laws on the status of these two towns exist

Municipal structures are very fragmented in the Slovak Republic. There are many small municipalities in Slovakia. Over two-thirds of all municipalities have fewer than 1 000 inhabitants.

Table 5.1
Municipalities by Population Size

Population Size In Categories	Number of Municipalities	Percentage	Number of Inhabitants	Percentage
0–1 000	1 966	68.39	871 275	16.17
1 000–2 000	544	18.29	766 057	14.22
2 000–5 000	241	8.38	709 016	13.16
5 000–10 000	52	6.76	364 389	6.76
10 000–50 000	61	2.12	1 330 498	24.70
50 000–100 000	9	0.31	652 850	12.12
100 000+	2	0.07	693 565	12.87
Total	2 875	100.00	5 387 650	100.00

* data are valid to December 31 1997

SOURCE: Nemeč, Bercik and Kuklis, 2000: 336

Deputies, councillors and mayors are directly elected. The mayor is the highest official holding municipal office. Municipal council consist of councillors, who are entitled to create municipal board and committees. These can act as advisory bodies to the mayor and the municipal council. Each municipality has a chief auditor, elected by municipal council.

The framework under which local governments operate was established in 1990. Slovakia is still a highly centralised state, so local self-governments have only limited competencies and responsibilities, many of which are only symbolic in character. Under law, municipalities are responsible for the following functions:

- management of movable property and real estate owned by the municipality, and of property owned by the state and temporarily transferred to the municipality by law;
- creation and approval of municipal budgets, and the organisation of public discussions on such issues;
- administration and collection of local taxes and fees;
- supervision of economic activities within the municipality and, in particular, issuing binding resolutions on investment activities; the use of local resources; the initiation of business activities of legal entities and individuals, and the approval of business plans in the interest of the municipality;
- creation and protection of the well-being and working conditions of the municipal population; protection of the environment and provision of education, culture, personal interest programs, physical culture and sports;
- conceptualisation and approval of the territorial planning of settlements and zones, and of the development of the social sphere of the municipality;
- establishment, incorporation, cancellation and supervision of budgetary organisations and subsidised organisations as well as other legal entities, in compliance with special regulations;
- maintenance of public order;
- comprehensive construction of housing and related infrastructure;
- maintenance and administration of public property;
- local public transportation in the larger cities;
- construction, maintenance and management of local roads, public spaces, natural reserves, public lighting, marketplaces, cemeteries, local water resources and wells, water supply networks, sewage and water purification establishments;
- construction, maintenance and management of establishments addressing local culture, sport, leisure, tourism, child care, ambulatory health services and basic social services;

- support for education, natural and heritage preservation, culture and sport;
- support for humanitarian activities, and,
- administration of municipal police and fire services.¹

Municipalities are entitled to own private property, and to manage their own budgets, which are autonomous from those of the central government. Mayors are responsible for managing these, overseen by chief auditors. The main sources of revenues of local government are:

- revenues from municipal properties and real estate;
- revenues from municipal business activities (e.g. tourism);
- revenues from central government taxes (e.g. road taxes, income tax);
- municipal taxes (e.g. real estate tax);
- municipal fees (e.g. for parking, dogs etc);
- loans from commercial banks, and,
- transfers from the budget of the central government.

The share of municipal expenditures related to GDP and to total state budget expenditures in 1991–1998 is shown in the following table:

Table 5.2
Expenditures of Local Self-governments in Slovakia, 1991–1998 [%]

Indicator	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Municipal Revenues /GDP	5.1	6.2	5.7	4.6	4.3	4.4	4.4	4.0
Municipal Expenditures /GDP	4.5	5.9	5.2	4.3	3.7	4.0	4.1	3.8
Municipal Expenditures /State Budget Expenditures	11.2	15.9	11.1	11.8	11.0	12.0	12.2	13.9

SOURCE: Nemeč, Bercik and Kuklis, 2000: 325

2. PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

2.1. Public Opinion of Local Governments

2.1.1 Levels of Trust in Local Self-government

Self-government was formally distinguished from state administration in the Slovak Republic in 1990. Municipal self-government now ranks among the most trusted institutions in Slovakia, enjoying the trust of more than half the citizens of Slovakia from the beginning of its existence. We can see the development of the level of trust in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3
The Development of the Level of Trust in Self-government [%]

1992	October 1995	January 1997	January 1998	March 1999	September 2000
58	51	55	50	62	53

SOURCES: Buchta, 1993; Bačišin, 1996a; Názory, 1998, 2000.

The level of trust in self-government has been stable. It was a little higher only after the local election (held in December 1998) in March 1999. This then fell to its original level.

If we study these data in greater detail, we can see several trends. First, the smaller a municipality, the higher its level of trust in self-government. In October 1995, 60% of citizens who lived in municipalities of less than 2 000 inhabitants, and 54% of those who lived in municipalities of between 2 000 and 10 000 people, trusted self-government. The lowest level of trust was recorded in cities of over 100 000 inhabitants (38%). [Bačišin, 1996a]

Second, the level of trust increases with the higher age of respondents. According to the same opinion poll, the lowest level of trust in self-government was recorded among citizens under 25 years of age. [Bačišin, 1996a] On the other hand, the highest level of trust in self-government was recorded among older people. Fifty-nine percent of citizens between 50 and 59 trusted self-government, while the level of trust was 53% on the whole. [Názory, 2000] Similarly, in March 1999, self-government recorded the highest trust among respondents over 60 years old—67% (The average trust rate was 62%). [Názory, 1999]

Third, the higher the level of education, the higher the level of trust in self-government. According to an opinion poll held in September 1997, 66% of those with university degrees expressed trust in self-government, while the average level of trust reached only 57%. [Názory, 1997]

Fourth, people with higher socio-economic status have expressed higher levels of trust in self-government. According to the same September 1997 opinion poll, 66% of businessmen trusted local self-government. On the other hand, 49% of unemployed people had the opposite opinion. [Názory, 1997]

The nationality of respondents is the next factor influencing trust in self-government. Hungarians have expressed a higher level of trust in self-government compared to the Slovaks. The opinion poll conducted in September 1997 showed that 64% of Hungarians trusted self-government. [Názory, 1997]

Finally, the level of trust in self-government has not been influenced by political party inclination. Regional affiliations seemed to play next to no role in such attitudes.

Self-government has ranked among the most trustworthy institutions in Slovakia in comparison with other institutions, as well. It has had the highest level of trust after the army and Slovak public radio. The high trust expressed was of the president in 2000 in comparison with previous years was probably due mostly to the long-term illness of President Rudolf Schuster, who was unable able to hold office during that time. (Although it has fallen since his return to office.)

Table 5.4
The Level of Trust in Self-government and Other Institutions

Institution/Trust [%]	September 1995	January 1998	September 2000
Army of the the Slovak Republic	65	74	62
Slovak radio	59	71	72
TV Markíza	—	60	57
Constitutional court of the the Slovak Republic	—	58	44
Local self-government	51	50	53
President	37	36	67
Government	32	33	32
National council of the Slovak Republic	30	32	24

SOURCE: Názory, 1997; 1998; 2000

The high level of trust in self-government in Slovakia can be explained by various factors. The process of transformation of the public administration system begun in 1990, but the actual

decentralisation of power has still not started yet. Institutions of local self-government created the high level of trust experienced at the beginning of the political transformation process. (Fortunately, this level of trust has not been destroyed by the negative experiences of citizens who have since run the municipal offices.)

But the fact remains that most Slovaks still have to go to national government offices to satisfy many basic civic needs. Therefore, all their complaints because of bureaucracy etc. are still being addressed to the national administration.

Traditions also play an important role. Especially in rural Slovakia, mayors and councillors have long been appreciated as having a relatively high degree of moral authority. (This opinion prevails especially among older citizens.) In Slovakia, there are many small villages where people are well acquainted with their mayor and councillors, contributing to the high level of trust in self-government in these municipalities.

The low level of trust in self-government—which has been expressed most often by unemployed, and by less well-educated people—can be explained primarily by these groups' low socio-economic status. Therefore, they have lost trust in virtually all institutions.

The Association of Towns and Villages (ZMOS) was founded in 1990. More than 95% of municipalities in Slovakia are now members of the Association. ZMOS is a very influential organisation and its portrayal in the mass media is very positive, enabling the organization to influence public opinion.

It is possible to say that Slovak self-government now has the underpinnings to be able to hold the high level of trust of citizens it now enjoys. It will be interesting to observe the development of this level after the planned decentralisation reforms take effect.

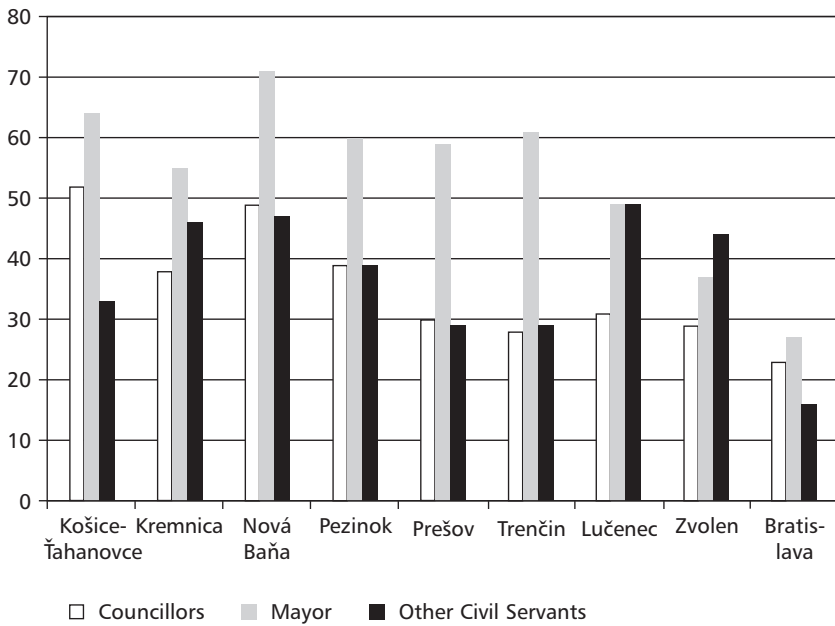
2.1.2 Levels of Satisfaction with Local Government

The results of the research from February 1996 concerning the satisfaction of the citizens with their treatment at municipal offices (i.e., the institution of the local self-government) and at district offices (i.e., the local state government) showed that the satisfaction of citizens with the carrying out of political duties at municipal offices was higher than it was at district offices. Satisfaction with carrying out matters at the municipal level was expressed more by women (58%) than by men (52%); by citizens older than 60 years (61%), and by respondents living in municipalities of less than 2 000 inhabitants (60%).

From the regional point of view, respondents from central Slovakia were the most satisfied with the work of municipal offices (61%). Less satisfaction was shown by respondents from Bratislava (46%). [Názory, 1996]

Individual surveys confirmed that the less informed people are about the work being carried out by their municipality, the less satisfied they are with its work and the less trust they are willing to put in it. (The same fact was proven by surveys conducted in the Czech Republic.²)

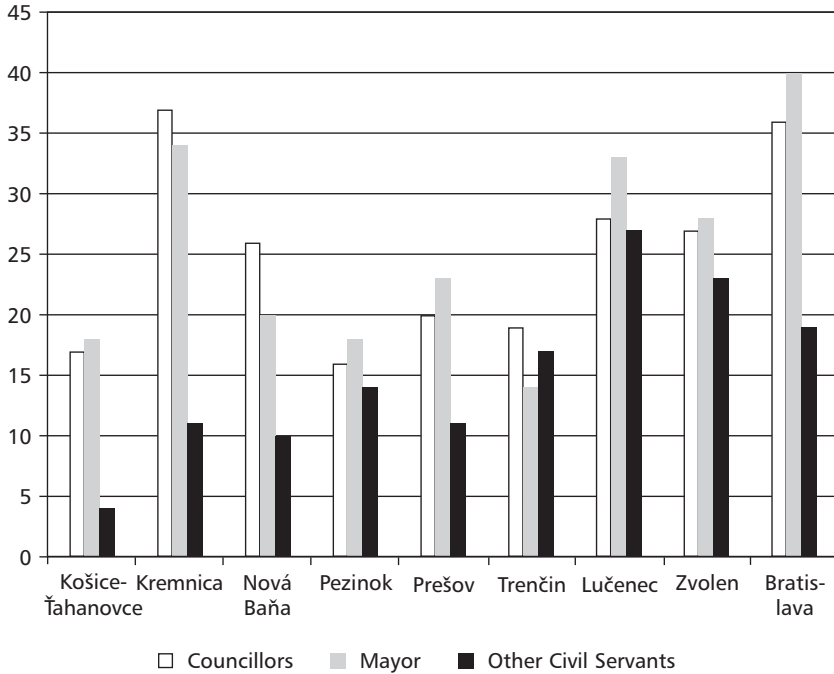
Figure 5.1
How Citizens are satisfied with the Work of the Mayor, Councillors and Other Public Employees



As for citizens' satisfaction with the municipality and its credibility (Figure 5.1), people are most satisfied with the work of the mayor in their town and also trust him more (53.6% of respondents). This might have something to do with the fact that the mayor is almost always the best known personality representing the municipality, and the activities in towns are appraised according to his activities and presentation in public. Only 25.3% of respondents were dissatisfied with their mayor's work, and 21% of respondents were indifferent—they responded "I do not know" (Figure 5.2).

By comparison, 35.4% were satisfied with the performance of town councillors; 25.1% were dissatisfied and up to 39.2% voiced no opinion. This is related to the fact that people are largely uninformed about the everyday workings of their municipality, and the decision making processes involved.

Figure 5.2
Public Dissatisfaction with the Work of the Mayor, Councillors and Employees Approach



From those citizens who occasionally or frequently deal with their local council, 36.8% were satisfied with staff behaviour; 15.1% were dissatisfied. Considering that most people deal with their councils rarely, up to 88.7% of respondents were unable to offer an opinion as to the quality of employee work. Surveys showed that only 8.2% of respondents would visit the council quite often during a given year. Thirty-eight percent came in touch with the council only sporadically, and up to 53.7% did not visit their council at all (Figure 5.3).

Despite the reality that the municipality is the most accessible form of government administration for most citizens, none of the municipalities surveyed were felt to offer above-average services in keeping citizens informed of matters of public import. Only 2.7% of respondents felt they were being informed above an average level. Forty-nine percent felt informed at an average level, and 21% said they had no interest in municipal activities whatsoever. But the fact that approximately 32% of respondents felt they were being informed at a below-average level is worthy of consideration. This fact is closely connected with overall satisfaction levels of citizens with their local governments. (Figure 5.4)

Figure 5.3
Frequency of Citizens Visits to Local Councils

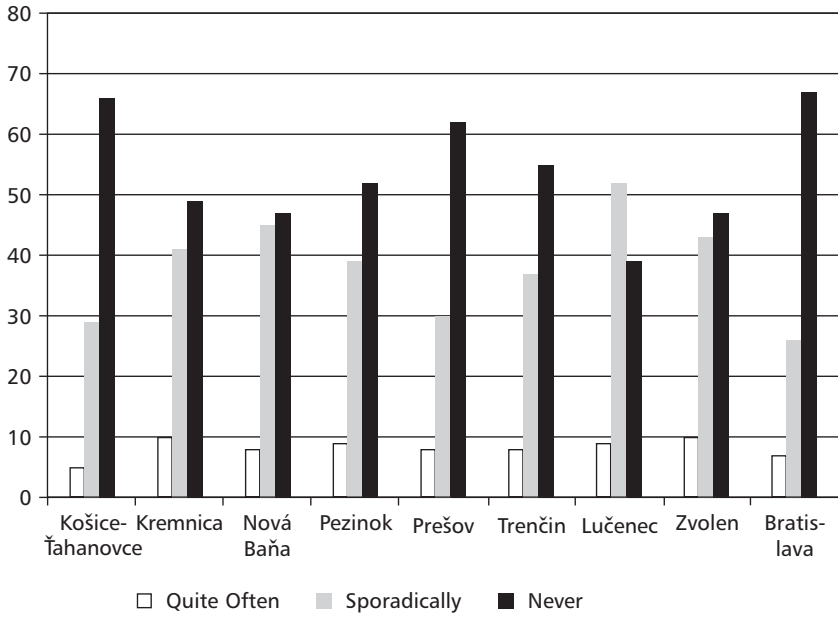
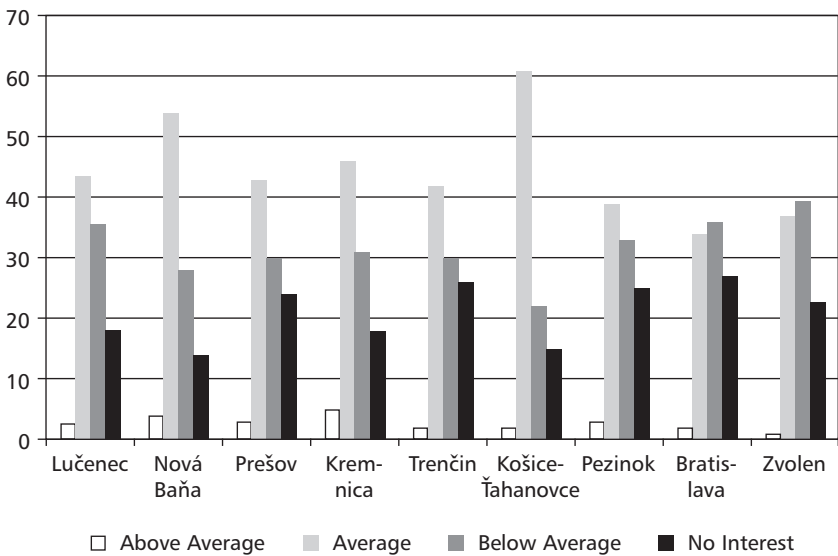
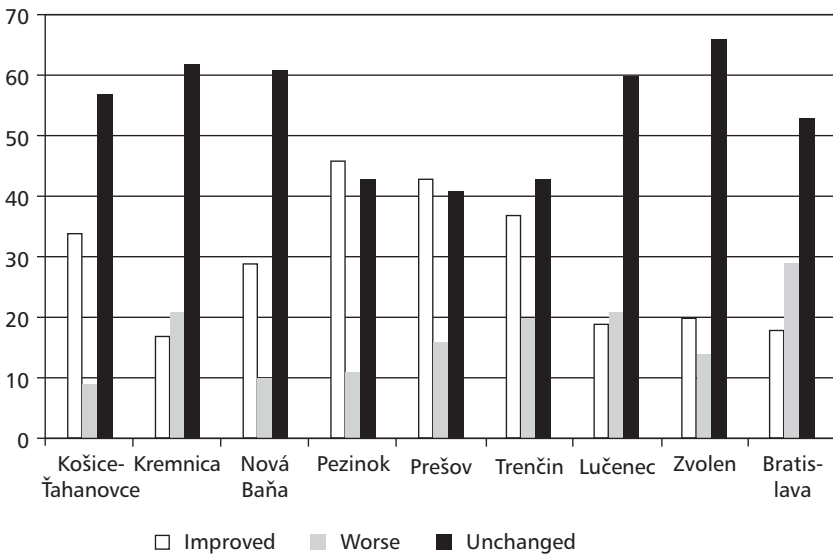


Figure 5.4
How Citizens are Informed About Municipal Activities



Evaluation of quality changes in living conditions in towns (e.g., cleanliness and safety, urban development, etc.) during the last election period is shown by Figure 5.5. Only 29.2% thought that conditions in their town had improved during the last electoral period and on the contrary; 16.7% consider the conditions as having gotten worse. (It might be considered astonishing that more than half of all respondents (54%) thought that conditions had remained unchanged.)

Figure 5.5
**Evaluation of Changes in Living Conditions in the Town
 During the Last Electoral Period**



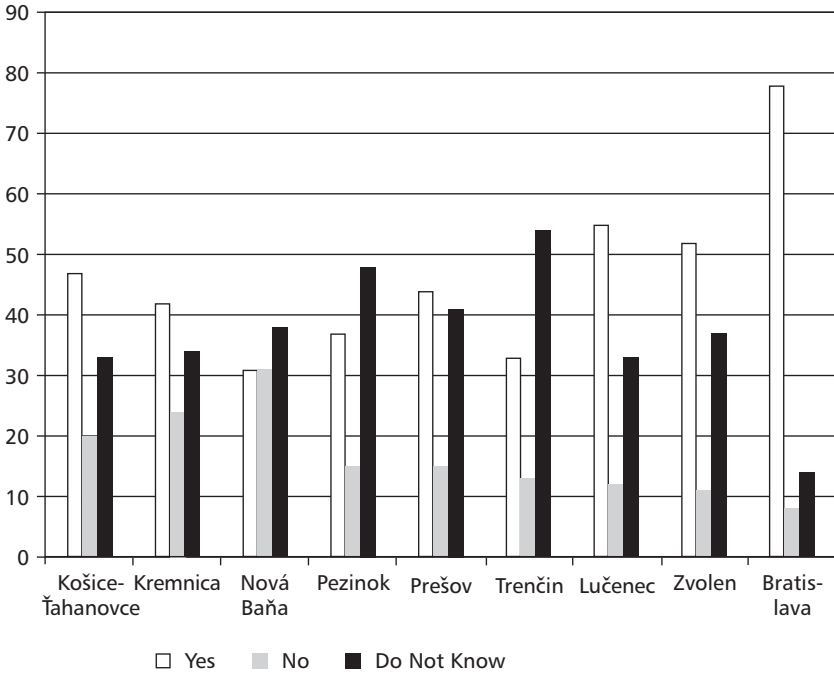
Perhaps elected representatives of municipalities should give a thought as to whether they sufficiently and effectively communicate what is happening in their towns. It could also be important to find better ways to get citizens involved in the local political decision-making process.

One of the most current problems drawing our attention was corruption in local-level politics. An alarming fact is that up to 46.5% of respondents consider this problem as a widespread phenomenon, with only 16.6% of respondents giving a contrary opinion; 36.8% of respondents gave no opinion (Figure 5.6).

The fact that more than 50% of citizens do not come in contact with their council during any given year gives an incentive to think where and how to inform people about council work. (i.e., where might it be best to make publicly known various lists, instructions, decrees, etc., if more than half of the adult citizens do not visit their local council during any given year.)

Figure 5.6

Do Citizens Consider the Problem of Corruption in Their City Council Significant?



Also, the fact that only 36% of those respondents who visited their council were satisfied with its work, but those who did not are *also* usually dissatisfied, should also be considered carefully. This appears to mean that a citizen is inclined to be more critical and mistrustful about his council's work if he *does* actually come in contact with the council. (This might have much to do with the widespread feeling of insufficient information and inaccurate notions of what councils actually have competencies to do for citizens.) As for criticisms and expressions of praise, it was interesting to note that Slovaks more often express criticism, supported with facts, than they do praise.

The flows of information and communication from municipalities towards their inhabitants seem to be the main factors for creating mutual trust and satisfaction. This was confirmed by every survey conducted between 1996 and 2000.³ Public perceptions of local self-government are shown not only in the public opinion surveys, but also in daily experiences with the participation of citizens in local self-government activities. By way of illustration, the following examples are presented:

- The Community Foundation in eastern Slovakia offers citizens financial support to implement projects in the areas of the environment, culture, health and social activities, education,

sports, democracy, and environmental promotion. This foundation channels grants of up to SKK 20 000, which may be sought by individuals as well as groups of private persons, non-governmental sector organisations, and other non-profit organisations operating within a towns' jurisdiction.

- Self-government officials of a municipality in central Slovakia proposed an alternative solution to the routing of a highway planned near the municipality to the investor. With support by local citizens behind it, (won over also thanks to broadcasting their viewpoints on the local cable television station), they persuaded the investor, the designer of the highway and the appropriate local state administration office to appreciate the advantages of the proposed solution.

2.2. Public Perception of Representative Democracy at the Local Level

2.2.1 Turnout in Local Elections as an Indicator of Public Perception of Local Government

Turnout in local elections is an important indicator of how the public perceives local government. In Slovakia, we can only follow the turnout in elections for mayors and councilors in towns and villages because there is not at present any higher level of self-governing bodies. Local elections have been held three times in Slovakia. (Although the turnout has been relatively high and stable, it was higher in 1990 than in 1994 and 1998.)

Comparing the turnout in local elections with those in parliamentary elections also gives a very significant indication of how the Slovak public perceives local government. By law, both local and parliamentary elections should take place every four years in Slovakia. However, although these regular intervals have been adhered to in the case of local elections, political instability has meant that there have already been four parliamentary elections in the post-communist period.

Table 5.5
Comparison of Turnouts in Slovakian Parliamentary and Local Elections

	1990	1992	1994	1998
Parliament elections [%]	95.39	84.20	75.65	84.24
Local elections [%]	63.70	—	52.40	53.90

SOURCE: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

The comparison above shows that there has been a consistently lower level of turnout in municipal elections than in parliamentary elections. This indicates that citizens believe central government is more important than local government, and that the most important decisions are made by the former.

There are several factors which have influenced turnout in Slovakia. First, there is the size of a given municipality; higher turnout occurs overwhelmingly in the smallest municipalities. For example, in the 1994 parliamentary election, the lowest turnout was in cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants, and the highest in the smallest villages with less than 200 inhabitants. [Krivý 1999: 22]. However, in the 1998 elections—which as a result of the many controversial actions of the 1994–1998 Meciar government, were generally marked by an exceptionally high level of political mobilisation—the turnout in towns nearly approached that in the countryside.

Table 5.6
Turnout in Parliament Election According to Size of Municipality

Size of Municipality/Turnout [%]	1994	1998
Less than 200	88.4	89.2
200–499	85.8	88.3
500–999	83.2	86.7
1 000–2 000	81.2	86.0
2 001–5 000	78.3	84.1
5 001–10 000	75.2	84.2
10 001–20 000	71.8	82.2
20 001–50 000	71.9	82.4
50 001–100 000	72.8	83.6
More than 100 000	66.2	82.7
National total	75.6	84.2

SOURCE: Krivý, 1999: 22

In the local elections, this phenomenon was even more marked. Whereas turnout in villages often exceeded 70%, the level in the country's largest cities was far lower. For example, local turnout in the national capital, Bratislava, was 44.5% in 1990, 33.85% in 1994, and 36.7% in 1998 local elections. A similar case is in the city of Košice, where turnout was 46.5% in 1990, 39.11% in 1994 and 35.70% in 1998 local elections. [Volby do organov 1994, 1998; Krejčí,

1994]. These findings confirm the near-global sociological phenomenon that there are stronger interpersonal relationships in smaller municipalities than in bigger ones.

Another important factor is the ethnicity of citizens. The highest turnout is in municipalities with an ethnic Hungarian majority. In the 1994 parliamentary election, the average turnout in Hungarian municipalities was 8.2%, with the highest turnout in the districts of Dunajská Streda and Komárno [Krivý–Feglová–Balko, 1996: 98]. On the other hand, the turnout in ethnic Slovak municipalities was only 78.4% [Krivý, 1999: 71].

Third, there are differences between the regions. The highest turnout was recorded in small municipalities in the east of Slovakia, and in the areas of southern Slovakia with an ethnic Hungarian majority. The higher level of turnout in the east of Slovakia can be explained by behaviour patterns inherited from the communist period, when voting was compulsory. (In fact, the communist era legacy still tends to be stronger there than in other parts of the country.)

There are also other factors that may influence the turnout in local elections: on average, 30% less than in parliamentary elections. The main one is the fact that parliamentary elections have so far always been held just a few months before the local elections. In 1998, the parliamentary election took place in late September and the local elections in December, while in 1994 the situation was even worse, since there was also a referendum in October. Consequently, when the electorate voted in the local elections in December 1994, voters were going to the ballot box for the third time in less than four months.

The results of public opinion polls help us to identify the reasons why people fail to vote in local elections. The first such poll was conducted a few months before the first post-communist local elections in 1990, and its results are important for understanding the attitudes of citizens in a post-communist society, many of which to some extent still persisted a decade later.

The main reasons for the relatively low turnout in local elections were disappointment with the June 1990 parliamentary elections; lack of confidence in the possibility of improving the present situation; unfamiliarity with the aims of candidates, and general displeasure with the candidates overall. [Názory, 1991]

This survey indicates citizens' views on the significance of local government at the beginning of the democratization process. These were also a reflection of their previous experiences with the communist-era "national committees", which were merely a dependent part of a centrally-directed system of power. The subordinate role of local authorities under the previous regime also retarded the development of civic participation in public affairs after 1990. According to a public opinion poll in 1995, almost 43% of respondents thought that the citizen's vote in municipal self-government decision-making did not carry much weight. Only 18 % believed that it did have clout, with 17% thinking that it carried no weight at all. [Bačišin, 1996]

Table 5.7
Reason Given by Citizens for Not Voting in the 1990 Local Elections

Reasons for Not Voting	Respondents [%]
Disappointment with the parliamentary election of June 1990	25
General lack of confidence in the possibility for improving the present situation	22
Unfamiliarity with the aims of candidates	14
Opposition to the candidates	12
Lack of interest in local election	8
No knowledge about the individual candidates	6
Absence from district during local election	6
Feelings that individual votes are meaningless	5
Other	2

SOURCE: Názory, 1991

The same survey also showed certain differences that correlated closely with the voters' levels of education. Voters with higher education are consistently aware of the need to vote in elections, but do not believe that they can really participate in local politics. One of the reasons for this could be the fact that candidates representing various parties do not run a campaign presenting their own local program. Only candidates for the office of mayor publicly present their own program of municipal development. This is a result of the fact that most municipal self-governments are very small and no regional level of self-government partisan politics exists as of yet.

2.2.2 Voter Preference at the Municipal Level

In Slovakia, voters currently elect 2 911⁴ municipal self-governments. A number of different factors obviously influence the sort of choices which the voters make.

A Electoral System

The election process is direct and based on a secret ballot. The municipal authorities—both mayors and councillors—are elected on the principle of the one-round majority electoral system: the candidate with the highest number of votes in a given municipal area wins. There is a choice of individual candidates, and voting is not necessarily based on candidates' party affiliation. Citizens strongly consider the present election system to be satisfactory; 62% of respondents in

a public opinion poll were in favour of the majoritarian election system. Only 13% were in favour of having a proportional system as used in parliamentary elections for municipal elections, and 25% of respondents had no opinion. [Bačišin, 1996b]

The one-round majoritarian election system influences the behaviour of voters by making them more interested in personalities than party platforms. Citizens often favour independent candidates, particularly for the position of mayor. In 1990, 25.8% of mayors and 15.8% of deputies were independent. In 1994, the figures were 28.8% for mayors and 9.0% for deputies, and in 1998, 28.2% for mayors and 9.0% for deputies. (see Tables 5A.2, 5A.3, 5A.4 in Appendix 2). It is probable that the Slovak model of „powerful „ mayors encourages citizens to vote for independent candidates for the office. While this factor is less important when they are choosing councillors. (Given the rather unstable political situation in Slovakia, there is an expectation on the part of voters that independent mayors will have more scope for reaching constructive compromises with the councillors, regardless of their party affiliation and the council coalitions, and with other local actors.)

B Developments During the 1990s

There have been differences between the three sets of local elections held during the 1990s. The first post-communist elections, held throughout what was then Czechoslovakia in 1990, took the form of a referendum against communism, in which the preference of the voters indicated that they were more against something than in favour of a clear alternative. The monopoly of the Communist Party and its representatives at the local level collapsed, and other political groupings emerged as a result of the revolutionary surge at the end of 1989. It was the candidates of new political parties such as the Public against Violence (VPN) and the Christian Democrats (KDH) who received the most votes. The Communist Party—at that point called the Communist Party of Slovakia-Party of the Democratic Left (KSS-SDL)—received 13.6% of the deputy mandates and 24.2% of the mayoral mandates (see Table 5A.2 in Appendix 2). However, we have to take into account that many elected candidates of KSS/SDL were people with considerable experience.

Under the communist regime, they had obtained skills in the public sphere and local government. [Offerdal–Hanspach, 1994] In the next four years up until 1994, this transformation process and the fracturing of the left side of the political spectrum continued to the point where the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) stood for election separately as an extreme-left party, receiving only 0.8% of the deputy mandates and 0.85% of the mayoral mandates. This occurred alongside the larger Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), which had a much stronger social democratic profile. The Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) won 17.98% of the mayoral mandates and 15.7% of all deputy mandates. (see Table 5A.3 in Appendix 2)

In the municipal elections in the independent Slovakia of 1994 and 1998, two general developments took place regarding the political parties involved which appear rather contradictory. On

the one hand, there appeared to be a tendency towards increasing political segmentation at the local level, and the number of individuals registered for local elections dramatically increased. Official lists of political parties and movements showed 40 political subjects in the 1990 local elections, and 70 in the 1994 local election.

In the 1998 local election, 98 different parties and movements took part in the local elections, and 113 different party coalitions appeared on lists of candidates. [Statistical yearbooks, 1991; 1995; 1999] Many new political groupings put forward candidates, although they did not have either a stable organisational structure in the municipality, or experience with party politics. We can assume that the master-plan strategy of many of these new political entities was based on recruiting candidates who were well-known to the majority of the population in the municipality.

In spite of this, however, the candidates of the comparatively small number of political parties represented in the National Parliament are the most successful in local elections in Slovakia to date. Consequently, the recruitment process of politicians at the local level is very much influenced by the interests of parliamentary political parties. Parliamentary struggles between the governing coalition and the opposition seem to be more of a determinant for local policy than party political programs of local or municipal importance.

In practice, parliamentary political parties usually use their own representatives at the local level as a tool of central politics, and local politicians use the political parties which supported them during the election to lobby for state subsidies from the central government. (In fact, one of the significant factors which permits strong ties between the centre and municipal self-government is the fact that there is no regional level of self-government with its own competencies which would represent local interests and regional programs.)

C Local Coalition-Building

At the national level, Slovak politics has been marked by a wide government-opposition division. But at the local level, co-operation is much more fluid and more on an ad hoc basis. The political parties not only support their own local candidates, but also often support candidates who run under the banner of locally-based coalitions (11.6% in the 1998 election). These coalitions sometimes appear very strange from the viewpoint of national politics. For example, even though KDH and HZDS are opponents on the national stage, at the local level the two parties have sometimes co-operated to the extent of supporting joint candidates. In 1998, five candidates were elected on a joint HZDS-KDH-SDL platform, although HZDS was in opposition and KDH and SDL were government parties. (One candidate was elected on a joint DS/HZDS/SNS platform, although DS was in the government coalition, while HZDS and SNS were opposition parties, and so on.)

There are several possible explanations for this. In a local environment, there is a much more pragmatic attitude towards forming coalitions. The overriding objective clearly is to ensure

influence over council decision-making. At the same time, it is sometimes merely a question of instrumental alliances between the political, economic and financial lobbies whose support is essential for the development of the municipality.

D Ethnic Factors

In Slovakia, the national-ethnic identity problem is also highly politicised, with clear evidence that voters strongly prefer candidates with similar ethnic backgrounds. In municipalities which are ethnically heterogeneous, the issue of nationalistic consciousness became salient for political interest group formation and for political entrepreneurs. This process is a reaction to the somewhat confrontational tactics observable at the national political level, and of battles among and within established national political parties. In municipalities, the national identification of citizens strengthened the position of ethnically-orientated parties among voters of the same ethnicity.

The tendency to put nationalistic principles before civic principles and elect candidates with a nationally-oriented political platform has been evident from the 1990 local elections onward. The ethnically heterogeneous environment of a part of Slovakia has become fertile soil for interest groups which base their political agenda on the national awareness of their voters. The process of political fragmentation according to ethnicity was evident not merely because of the existence of parties with a primarily nationalist profile, such as the ethnic Hungarian Coexistence (ESWS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS), but also later through the splitting off from the Christian Democratic Movement of the more nationally-oriented Slovak Christian Democratic Movement (later the Christian Social Union, SKDH–KSÚ) and the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (MKDH).

Coexistence, the Hungarian Civic Party (MOS), and MKDH took part in the 1994 local elections as separate parties, but grouped together as the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) in the 1998 local elections. The ethnic principle had therefore entered the political fray and become one of the main foci of political competition at the local level.

National party cleavages promote local political tensions, and thus ethnic identities become more sensitive. Likewise, tensions arising from the use of an official language reminds us how easily the idea of “the nation” can lead to the denial of the idea of “the citizen” and to the negation of democracy.

2.2.3 Turnover Among Mayors Since 1990

Mayors in Slovakia are very important members of the new local self-government because they are directly elected by citizens and hold top executive powers. In the 1990 local elections, many of the candidates for mayor who had previously been either directly or indirectly linked with the Communist Party appeared in the other political groupings which emerged with the fragmenting

of the centre and left of the political spectrum—particularly SDL' and HZDS. This probably happened because most of the candidates overcame the problem of their own political identity.

A *Continuity of Power*

In the Slovak case, the philosophy of stressing continuity of power at the municipal level is confirmed very clearly by the list of elected mayors in the 1994 and 1998 municipal elections. Comparing results between the local elections, which were four years apart, we can observe that there is clearly a strong incumbency factor at work. In 1994, the turnover of mayors in local elections was 68.4%. Continuity of power was stronger in villages than in towns and cities. (There are only 136 towns and cities in Slovakia at present.) Fifty-three point seven percent of "city" mayors (*primatori*) and 69% of all mayors in villages (*starostovia*) were re-elected. (Konečný, 1994) So in both forms of local political authority, more than half the mayors were re-elected.

In 1998, the turnover of mayors was even lower. Of the mayors elected in 1994, 76.3% were re-elected four years later. [Zoznam starostov... In: *Obecné noviny*, 1999]. This fact suggests that a high level of mayoral self-confidence, repeat nominations by the political parties, and the opinion of the electorate may help explain the small turnover of personnel.

It is also important to emphasise that there is a high number of smaller municipalities in Slovakia. Such villages have difficulty fielding more than a few candidates for mayoral races. For example, in 1990 there was only one candidate for the position of mayor in 916 from all 2 830 villages in the country. [Slovensko... In: *Národná obroda*, 1990]

The trend towards continuity of power is also connected with the configuration of new group interests in the local environment. The formation of a new local political elite is associated with the creation of new networks, and this influences the decision-making process. Public opinion polls also indicated that there were newly-established networks among interest groups of businessmen, bankers, entrepreneurs, various civic organisations and political parties. An interest in being in direct contact with municipal government representatives is expressed mostly by entrepreneurs (55%); workers express less interest. [Bačišin, 1996a] In 1997, 60 % of independent entrepreneurs expressed confidence in municipal governments. [Názory, 1997]

The connection between continuity of the power of mayors and networks among various interests groups could also be proven by research about mayors.⁵ Mayors were asked the following question: "*Sometimes there may be a conflict between what you yourself think is a correct decision for your municipality and the opinion among groups of people for whom you have special consideration. In such instances do you then usually follow your own opinion or the opinion of others?*" (1 = Own opinion; 2 = Opinion of others, 3 = Depends on the situation, 4 = Don't know) Only 3% of respondents selected answer 2, 86% answered number 3.

Is there a direct correlation in Slovakia between the economic and political interests of local groups and mayors' remarkable continuity of power rates? Offerdal, when evaluating the mayors'

ideas of style of representation according to their social background, argued that mayors with higher social status consider the role of mayor more as a role of trustee than as of any type of delegate. [Offerdal, 1999]. One valid explanation could be that the longer the mayor is in his or her office, the more they consider themselves unique and do not share the same interests as citizens. Should this be interpreted as a sign of oligarchy of power? What is the connection between the way the mayor is elected, and the measure of his responsibility to his constituents? (*Mayors' answers to the question: "When making decisions as mayor, to what degree do you feel it is important to give special consideration to the following groups of people? Indicate your answer from 1 ("of little importance") to 5 ("very important") Place one check for each row" are in Table 5.8.*)

Table 5.8

When Making Decisions as Mayor, to What Degree Do You Feel It Is Important to Give Special Consideration to the Following Groups of People?

All constituents in the municipality	90
Those who voted for you	57
A local area of the municipality	48
Central Government authorities	34
Certain occupation groups	28
Religious groups	25
The party or group to which you belong	20
Ethnic groups	20

* Cumulating of responses *very important* and *important*.

SOURCE: Offerdal, 1999

In municipal government decision-making, mayors were most interested in taking into account the opinion of all the people living in their village, and were less interested in special interest groups. This may be seen as a logical consequence of their being directly elected. Among the various answers, the weight of opinion of political and ethnic groups ranks lowest. That could mean that mayors understand their role more as the role of trustee in economic issues and other issues like religion and employee interest groups, rather than in political issues. These are the guarantees that their continuity in power will be legitimised in direct elections.

B Strong Position of Independent Mayors

In Slovakia, the tendency to trust independent candidates most, especially when electing mayors, is very strong. Because most municipal self-governments are very small and the selection of

candidates is limited, it is usual in many municipalities for incumbency to play an important role. Personal contacts and experiences do influence choice, but many other factors can also play a role. The tendency to support independent mayors is probably the result of an expectation that independent mayors will prefer objective dialogue with all political partners. In 1990, the election results showed that 26% of candidates described themselves as independents. (Independent candidates received the highest number of votes in 14 of Slovakia's 38 districts.)

In the 1994 local elections, this tendency was strengthened. The proportion of independent mayors (i.e., those who stated they were independent, and those who gave no party affiliation) had nearly reached 30%, which was an increase of 3.6%. Looked at by district, independents got the most votes in the mayoral contests in 22 districts, which is eight more than in 1990. The election results in 1998 showed that the tendency to support independent mayors is really very significant: 28.2% of mayors were independent. (See Tables 5A.2, 5A.3, 5A.4 in Appendix 2)

The growth in the number of independent mayors is interesting, and not just because of what it indicates about voters' preferences. We must also ask what the motivation of the mayors themselves was when they stood as independents. The political self-assurance of these mayors may derive from a belief in their own ability, knowledge and skill in public service, or from the desire not to have their own activity restricted by any party interests, or from the tactic of trying to cover up their own political orientation in order to attract undecided and uncertain voters. The motivation of non-party mayors is worthy of deeper investigation.

2.3 The Influence of the Public in the Preparation and Implementation of Public Administration Reform

Non-governmental organizations appeal for the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act. The Act on Free Access to Information took effect on 1 January 2001. The Information Act guarantees citizens the right to access to certain types of information. It also obliges public institutions to inform the public about all matters except those categorized as state secrets. The actual wording of the Information Act and its approval by the National Parliament were influenced by the participation of citizen's organizations to a great extent.

A group of non-governmental, non-profit organizations initiated an establishment of the Citizens' Initiative for Creating a Good Freedom of Information Act in June 1999. The group was motivated by citizens' negative experiences when providing information by the state administration offices and local governments. Their aim was to contribute to the higher transparency of public administration. On this platform, "Nine Principles for Creating a Good Freedom of Information Act" were formulated. The basic principle was that everything that was not declared secret should by definition be open to public scrutiny. This principle reflected the frustration of the public at the existence of a broad "gray zone" in which information is neither secret nor public.

These principles were a product of a broad discussion in the NGO community. More than 120 citizen organizations with more than 100 000 members were involved in the discussion. In addition, other sectors of the society, media and many individuals endorsed the principles.

At about the same time, two groups of councilors of the National Parliament announced independently that they were working on the Access to Information Law proposal. Also, the Ministry of Justice started to engage in the access to information debate, and began to prepare their proposal regarding the wording of the Information Act. The Citizens' Initiative monitored the activities of the two groups of councilors. Soon afterwards, certain NGOs managed to obtain two proposals. It soon became clear that neither of them met with former expectations. Therefore, they decided to ask politicians for mutual co-operation and involvement of NGOs into the process. As this was not successful, the Citizens' Initiative prepared its own proposal for the wording of the Information Act. The development of the Government proposal of the Information Act was also monitored and commented on by the Citizens' Initiative. The Ministry ignored these comments. According to the experts of the Citizen's Initiative, this proposal would not secure free access to information to the extent that they desired.

The Citizens' Initiative proposal was supported by one of the councilors of the National Parliament who had started to prepare his own proposal in 1999. He submitted the citizens' proposal to the National Parliament. Then, ministries received the proposal for their perusal. The Legislative Board of the Government discussed the proposal and proposed the changes, which would have broken the basic principles of the Act. The Government agreed on this opinion. In January 2000, the National Parliament got the proposal for the "first reading" and assigned it to the Committees of National Parliament. The discussions about the Act in Committees were then postponed until April 2000.

In the meantime, the Citizens' Initiative published postcards supporting their vision of an adequate information act. About 1 000 postcards were sent to the Chairman of the National Parliament by post, and about 2 000 other messages were sent by e-mail. Activists co-operated with the media, and organized discussions about principles of free access to information. They also presented various opinions of citizen organizations at all relevant committees held by the National Parliament. They analyzed proposals changing the original proposal and prepared their own arguments and counter-arguments.

These activists also prepared a survey of the proposals for changes of the original proposal of the Act, (with explanations of their likely impact on the eventual wording of the Act), and distributed it to all MPs. Citizens were welcoming councilors at the entrance to the Parliament, while activists were also inside the building, monitoring the voting. The Act on Free Access to Information was, at last, passed without major changes. The whole-year voluntary work of activists was efficient.

During this period, all versions of principles and the act were available to the public on the Internet. This was the first time in recent Slovak history when citizens prepared a proposal

regarding a specific piece of legislation with the co-operation of an MP. It showed that ordinary citizens now clearly had the power to influence public matters. It was also a positive example of co-operation between citizens, MPs, public administration officials, and members of the media.⁶

The new government elected in 1998 declared that public administration reform aimed at creating regional governments would be prepared, implemented and appointed by the Plenipotentiary for Public Administration Reform. In 1999, the government approved the Strategy of Public Administration Reform. The Plenipotentiary was asked to prepare a pilot program of Decentralization and Modernization of Public Administration, to run until January 2000.

During the preparation of the draft of the pilot program of “Decentralization and Modernization of Public Administration”, public discussions were held in two stages. The content of the first stage consisted of 12 separate discussions about all public administration areas (education, health service, social problems, transport, environment, culture, etc.), in which decentralization was being considered. The meetings were organized in Bratislava. Approximately 600 participants—including representatives from the government, central government authorities, and non-governmental institutions—took part.

The second stage of the public discussion took place in 16 regions of Slovakia with representatives of local self-government, local state government, non-governmental institutions and regular citizens. Approximately 2 000 participants took part in these meetings. Each meeting was organized as a workshop and conclusions concerning the reform speed, the size of decentralization of responsibilities, the organization of inter-communal cooperation and also potential risks of continuing or not continuing the reform of public administration were adopted in each of the meetings. Generally, it may be stated that the participants of the meetings supported the reform steps initiated in 2001, and supported the decentralization of duties to the fullest extent possible.

At an April meeting, community activists and non-governmental organizations from across Slovakia agreed that the slow process of approving the *pilot program* of “Decentralization and Modernization of Public Administration” could threaten the reform process. The Government approved the pilot program of “Decentralization and Modernization of Public Administration” in April 2000 as a basis for further legislative and preparatory work. This work appeared to be a very hard-fought process of seeking very wide-reaching political consensus. In November, the representatives of Slovak NGOs—the Rural Parliament of Slovakia, the Board of the Third Sector and the Ecoforum (the Slovak Forum of Environmental Initiatives) met with the Prime Minister and declared their concern with the slowdown of reform. (However, politicians did not agree on the principles of the reform until March 2001, when this study was still being drafted. NGOs expressed their concern about the reform more often and more insistently in this period. They also promised to contribute to the work on legislation and informing the public about public administration reform, which was welcomed by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda.)

The original idea of Decentralization and Modernization of Public Administration was that regional governments would start functioning in January 2002. To be able to function, the

voting system for regional elections should have been approved by the National Parliament in April 2001. In March, NGOs began a campaign for the implementation the public administration reform in order to influence the approval of the law in the National Parliament in April 2001. However, this was not successful, and political agreement was not reached about a number of regions in the country.⁷

2.4 The Portrayal of Local Government in the Media

The media in Slovakia become free of overt censorship after the fall of communism. National media obviously include the national press, radio and TV stations. But for the purposes of this study, we chose to focus on the main newspapers (Národná obroda, SME, Slovenská republika, Práca, Pravda, Hospodársky denník, Hospodárske noviny) and both private and state-owned radio and TV stations (Slovak TV and Slovak Radio on the one hand, and TV Markíza and Rádio Twist on the other) in our analysis.

At the same time that the free media emerged, the new local self-governments were created. However, it was only after a relatively lengthy period that the media began to offer more information about local government, and the special supplements devoted to regional problems and to self-government began being produced. For example, SME and Národná obroda are printed with special supplements devoted to regions every day. These supplements are one or two pages in length. In Slovakia, two national newspapers (Hospodárske noviny and Hospodársky denník) focus on business and economic issues. They have special supplements named “Public Administration” in the first case, and ”Self-government” in the second.

But local governments were overwhelmingly still seen from the viewpoint of central government. They were not perceived as autonomous units, which make their own policy for citizens, but rather as the tools of central government policy. Obviously, journalists generally speak or write only about issues which are interesting for the broader public—interesting cultural events, the life of the Romas, cases of corruption, arguments between councillors and mayors, the astronomically high debts of municipalities, etc.

Media are also interested in the activities of NGOs, especially their educational activities relating to self-government and the development of tourism. There is a positive portrayal of local governments providing social services such as opening homes for retired persons, organising cultural activities for senior citizens, and providing dinners for retired and homeless persons, especially at Christmas. This strengthens the trust of citizens in local government. Citizens feel that local government is closer to their problems than central government.

The planned public administration reform has been a very popular theme in Slovakia for several years, and the mass media are now interested in it, too. They present the opinions of the organisations of municipalities, especially ZMOS (Association of Towns and Villages in Slovakia)

and UMO (Union of Towns and Villages) about this reform. Media often only provide information about some particular problem, but they do not investigate it in great detail. Therefore they do not unearth faults in the system of central–local relationships.

The portrayal of local government in the national media is influenced by the actual possibilities local governments have to make their own policy—their decision-making opportunities and their financial resources. Therefore, citizens tend to think that local governments are basically powerless, have huge debts and only complain to central government and wait for it to help.

Local and central government are seen as strictly separated. So actions at a central level—e.g. personnel changes in cabinet, cases of corruption in central government, quarrels in governing coalitions, etc.—have no significant influence upon the public perception of local government. It seems that people still believe in local government despite the enormous loss of trust in central government. As research has shown, local government is widely perceived as a sphere where no important decisions are made, so it remains on the periphery of media interest. The media informs about activities in the regions, but local governments are not perceived as significant decision-makers.

ZMOS also prints its own magazine—*Obecné noviny*. The weekly offers information about problems of municipalities, activities of ZMOS, and NGOs which focus on local government. It also offers advice for mayors and employees of executive committees.

It is necessary at this point to say something about local Slovak media. Almost all municipalities have some sort of forum for providing information about their activities. They often publish a very simple “newspaper” (1–2 pages) with widely varying and often unregular periodicity. Naturally, bigger municipalities publish newspapers regularly. For example, Brezno publishes the newspaper “Horehronie” for the town and the region of Horehronie once a week. Similar newspapers are often focused on a certain historical region and are published by town or village councils or by District Offices (state administration) or by regional organisations of ZMOS.

3. EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN SLOVAKIA IN LEARNING ABOUT CITIZEN’S PREFERENCES

Do Local Politicians and Administrators Try to Learn About Public Preferences Between Elections? In trying to answer this question, the results of two small surveys could be presented. The first one is an illustrative survey of 16 local governments applying for the participation in the public relations project. The second is a survey among 66 randomly chosen local governments in Slovakia.

For an application for a “Public Relations” Project in 1998⁸, we asked interested local governments a question, whether they had done any public opinion survey or research⁹. Responses referred to

the period of the second half of the 90s. From 26 responses, 10 local governments stated that they had not conducted any research or survey at that time, (38%).

From the 16 local governments (62%), which have pursued a research project or survey:

- Eleven did just one survey during that time period.
- At least seven surveys were managed by other institution (according to some more concrete responses and to author's experience, four of them were initiated, managed and realised by IROMAR within the "Communicating Town" project.
- In only four cases did local governments conduct two or three surveys during that time period.
- Only one local government organizes surveys regularly.
- Four surveys were aimed at public needs assessment for certain public services (three for gas supply, one for separation of waste).
- Two surveys focused on public opinion on activities of local government.

In the survey among randomly chosen municipalities [IROMAR, 2000], we asked 66 local governments whether they had conducted any public opinion surveys or related research. Responses referred to the period of the last 10 years. From 66 responses, 65 answered this question and 49 local governments stated that they had conducted some research or survey at that time, (75%), and 17 had not done any research or survey (25%).

From 49 local governments which had pursued a research or survey:

- 60 surveys and researches were aimed at public needs service assessments, (30 for gas supply, for separation of waste, water, or other type infrastructure; 30 for culture, social and health problems, sport, cable TV, services, etc.);
- 26 surveys and studies focused on public opinion on activities of local government, (i.e., reconstruction, investment, development activities, land use plans, sociological surveys, etc.).¹⁰

The decade of analytical experience by the current authors show that attempting to learn public opinion is still quite rare in local governments in Slovakia. But it is possible to see an increasing trend in this area. Some local government representatives (mainly mayors, executive managers, public relations managers and others), having participated in several seminars, courses and projects, understand more than some of their peers that communication with the public is obligatory for providing better services and improving relations.

However, local government officials are more active in this field than local councilors. The main reason for this could be, in fact, that more educational projects have been oriented towards other local officials than local councilors. Local councilors usually do not devote too much time to

communicating with the public between elections. This is visible in results of researches in some towns asking inhabitants whether they do actually know their local councilor.

Results from the “Communicating Town” project show how local governments set about learning public opinion. During the Project, the participating towns learned the methodology for organising public opinion surveys. Remarkably, all participating towns responded that the project was useful for them. After two years, we asked six towns from the project whether they had organised any other survey by themselves. From this selection, only three towns have organised public opinion surveys since then. Two surveys were successful, as the organisers had applied the methodology from the Project. (The cases will be presented in section. One survey was not successful (this case was presented in the second part of section 2.2.2. Use of other feedback techniques will be discussed in the following chapter.)

3.1 Applying Techniques of Assessing Public Opinion by Slovak Local Governments

In the following text, the current practice in learning public opinion in Slovakia is described as using these tools¹¹:

- A Obligatory methods to consult public opinion before approving territorial (land use) plans, during the environmental impact assessment process, formal complaining procedures and local referenda.
- B Marketing types of research on public needs of services and public opinion surveys on satisfaction with services or level of information about local government services (i.e., via questionnaires, inquiries, etc.).
- C Other methods of an asking for and listening to public comments and suggestions regarding local government services and performances (i.e., public hearings on voluntary bases, encouraging complaints—message boxes, telephone lines, Internet comments, social partnership, analyses of mass media, etc.).

The current practice in using these methods in Slovak local governments is based mainly on the authors’ experience in working with local governments during training courses, seminars, conferences and consultancy work concerning the marketing and communication topics since 1990. The cases presented in this section had been led mainly by motivated mayors or chief executives. These individuals learned new techniques during seminars of consultation projects, but were not directly led, nor financed by outside grants or institutions. Therefore, we consider them as valuable for presenting innovative approaches to communicating with the public.

A
Obligatory methods for consulting public opinion before approving territorial (land use) plans, during the environmental impact assessment process, formal complaining procedures, and local referenda.

Land Use Plans

Municipalities in Slovakia are responsible for procurement and approval of territorial (land use) plans¹². In order to meet public needs, they are obliged by Act No. 50/1976 and its amendments to inform citizens about the draft of any territorial plan, as well as to keep the public informed after any approval of said plan. In the process of developing the plan, local governments have to make its full content available for public comment for 30 days. (For an additional 30 days, the public can offer comments and suggestions regarding the draft.)

Also, all institutions and organizations affected by the plan have to express their opinions on its drafting. After the approval of any territorial plans, local governments should make the information from the plan available to deputies, investors, entrepreneurs, as well as citizens. (The law does not, however, state methods of consulting and informing the public.¹³ Techniques of asking and informing citizen are left to the individual local governments.)

The standard current practice is that municipalities inform citizens about any opportunity to comment on the draft of the territorial (land use) plan by placing announcements on the signboards outside the local government offices [Švihlová–Wilson, 1999].

Citizens can also join the procedures during an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Local governments have to discuss bigger development projects with the public (motorways, dams, incinerators, and landfills, etc.).

Act No. 127/1994 states a legal obligation to discuss environmental impact assessment reports by means of public hearings for the first time in Slovakia. Local governments must organize public hearings in the EIA process. They are responsible for informing the public during the whole environmental impact assessment process. The Slovak Ministry of Environment evaluates comments and includes them in the final decision at the end of the environmental impact assessment process. Švihlová (2000) pointed out another aspect of this process: “The aim of a public hearing is not only to gain information about results of evaluations. It is also a venue for informal dialogue, public viewings, and for solving potential conflicts of interest which could be initiated by the project being evaluated.”

The public hearing is stated in the Act as a method of presenting the project to be evaluated by the EIA process, and for finding out public opinions. Nevertheless, this is only the first step. To make this process viable, local governments need to learn principles of organizing a successful public hearing. There have been activities in Slovakia to promote this process and help local governments in organizing public hearings.

Local Referenda

The legal framework for local referenda was laid down in the Slovak National Council Act No.369/1990 on Municipalities, but has been changed several times since then. The law calls

for referenda on issues related to the amalgamation, division or abolition of a municipality. The establishment or abolition of local charges, taxes or allowances, or upon the presentation of a petition signed by at least 20% of eligible voters in a municipality. The municipal council can also call referenda on important issues related to affairs of the municipality. The results of local referenda are legally binding. (More than half of all eligible voters in a municipality must participate in order for a referendum to be valid.)

A new amendment to the law on municipalities in January 2001 changed the conditions under which a mayor may be recalled. This clarified the conditions determining that a mayor can only be recalled by a local referendum. This must be called either by the council, or on the basis of a petition signed by 30% of local voters. This amendment confirms the fact that, since mayors are directly elected by their constituents, only the latter may recall the former. The position of the office of mayor is thereby further strengthened.

In the survey conducted by IROMAR (2000), 66 local governments were asked whether they have organized any local referenda or petitions. Responses referred to the period of the last 10 years. From 66 responses, 14 local governments (20%) stated that they had organized the local referendum. The petition was organized in 29 local governments (44%).

It is not possible to reach precise conclusions about the use of the local referendum because there is no system of registration. No institution—not even the Ministry of the Interior or the Organisation of Towns and Villages of Slovakia (ZMOS)—keeps such a register. Therefore, we will try to indicate the main issues on which local referenda were held, and report on some cases, and on problems with implementing their results.

As has been noted, there are some cases in which the use of a local referendum is compulsory. Referenda held about the division of a municipality are very frequent. (It is important to say that no local referendum on the amalgamation of a municipality has been conducted in Slovakia.)

Optional referenda have been held, for example, about the change of name of a municipality or the building of council rubbish dumps. We can illustrate this with the case of the village of Budmerice. The new owner of the land on which a council rubbish dump was located wanted to utilise the land in a different way. Therefore, he promised to build a new council rubbish dump somewhere else. An organisation of citizens disagreed with his proposal, so a local referendum was initiated. The voters eventually rejected the owner's proposal.

New territorial and administrative divisions were introduced in Slovakia in 1996. Before this happened, several local referenda were held in municipalities where citizens wanted to express their opinion about which district or region they should belong to. However, their decisions were not accepted by the national government in all cases.

The struggle for power is also visible on the level of local government, especially in those municipalities where a majority of municipal councillors have a different political affiliation from the mayor. Citizens have been also included into these struggles through local referenda.

We can draw some conclusions about the use of local referenda. First, there are insufficient mechanisms for implementing the law exist on referenda. This is illustrated by the case of *Tatranska Lomnica*. Citizens of this part of the *Sary Smokovec* municipality signed a petition demanding a local referendum detailing its possible separation from Sary Smokovec. However, the council in Sary Smokovec refused to call the referendum, even though the Constitutional Court confirmed the right of citizens to as much. This and similar cases have served to weaken the public's trust in local government.

Second, communication between central and local government is insufficient. Central government reacts only when its authority is threatened. This was the case in *Sturovo* in 1998—a unique instance which had national dimensions. The local referenda was a reaction to protracted arguments between the ruling government coalition and the opposition. Opposition political parties tried to introduce the direct election of the President of Slovakia, and successfully presented a petition so that a referenda had to be called. At the same time, the National Council (Parliament) decided to hold another referenda on joining NATO. The president called a single referendum in which both issues were included, but the Ministry of the Interior refused to include the question on the direct election of the president. Therefore, the town council of Sturovo decided to hold this referendum.

This action led to an amendment of the Municipal Act so that local referenda can now be held only on issues relating to self-government. The local referendum in Sturovo was a subject of very intense public discussion. It also increased the suspicions of some members of the public about local councils in general, and in particular those in the south of Slovakia—being an area with a very large ethnic-Hungarian population.

Third, local governments do not have effective tools for implementing the results of local referenda at the level of central government. The central government can boycott demands of municipalities expressed by local referenda. The referendum in Sary Smokovec in 1996 serves as an example of this. The citizens decided to change the name of their municipality to Vysoke Tatry. In spite of the will of the citizens, President Vladimir Mečiar's government rejected the change. According to his administration, the name of the municipality and the name of the mountain range could not be the same—although the law never expressly forbade it.

Fourth, local governments prefer other methods of communication with the public to local referenda. The low turnouts for local referenda is one of the main reasons for this—turnout has averaged about 50% in most of them, meaning that they had limited validity for anyone claiming a genuine mandate.

Formal Complaints Procedures

Local governments are obliged to handle complaints within 10 to 30 working days from receiving them (according to ad hoc requirements involved in researching the details of the complaint)¹⁴. Local governments can publish obligatory decrees establishing grievance procedures to the local government performance. Local governments usually work with complaints in accordance with the law. Of the 60 local Slovak governments, 55 now have special systems to handle complaints [IROMAR, 2000].

Some local governments encourage local people to comment on local government performance through mailboxes or answering machines. These methods will be discussed in part C of this chapter.

B

Marketing type of research on public needs of services and public opinion surveys on satisfaction with services or level of information about local government services (questionnaires, inquiries, etc.).

Marketing-style research, including public opinion surveys, are quite narrowly conducted in Slovak local governments (see results from the two surveys above). If local governments do any research, or public opinion surveys, they almost always organize them ad hoc—perhaps once or twice during a four-year electoral term—and often with just one narrow topic of contention, as was showed in the previous part of this chapter. Moreover, they often make mistakes not knowing the basic principles of creating questions, or preparing and processing a survey.

Two standard marketing research methods are discussed in this section—questionnaires and inquiries. While questionnaires are distributed among the representative sample of citizens (using specific criteria for choosing a sample of respondents), inquiries are distributed incidentally. In this respect, questionnaires are considered a more proper method of finding out public opinion than inquiries. (The latter are better suited to finding out comments and ideas.)

Below, experiences from three cases found and described during the “Communicating Town” project are presented.

Surveys

The local government in Kremnica¹⁵ applied the methodology used in the Communicating Town Project and has continued in pursuing public opinion surveys. As was done in the Project, they distributed questionnaires with the help of local students. This approach affects an appropriate return of distributed questionnaires (in the Project this ranged from 64% to 97%; an exception was 46% in Bratislava—the capital city). In 1999–2000, the Kremnica Town Council organised five surveys with specific topics (collection and separation of waste; town police services; quality of dishes served in the retiree club; free time of youth, and informing citizens of local government actions). In the last study, they used similar questions as were used in the Project in 1998 to be able to compare results more easily. [Bernátová, 2001]

Besides the surveys, the Kremnica Town Council have also been organising public hearings on the same topics. This enabled them to gain two types of information on the same topic, both quantitative (from the survey), and qualitative (comments from the public hearing). (Public hearings in Kremnica will be presented in Section C.)

The mayor and public relations officials in the Kremnica Town Council understand that, besides organising and processing the survey, it was necessary to present the results to the public. This revealed the local government's concerns regarding public opinion, which it regarded as vital input for Town Council decisions.

This success of Kremnica in conducting public opinion surveys has several reasons¹⁶:

- A motivated Mayor and staff of the Town Council responsible for communication with the public;
- Establishing a special department responsible for public relations;
- Co-operating with local students in distributing and collecting the questionnaires, or in leading standardised interviews: a better overall method;
- Taking the results of surveys into consideration in Town Council decisions,
- Presenting the results of the surveys in local newspapers, public meetings, etc.

In Pezinok¹⁷, the Town Council pursued three surveys in 1999–2000 with the following topics: the town police service; fees for parking, and reconstruction of a central town zone and tourism development. They use similar methodology as in the Communicating Town Project. [Bernátová, 2001]

The reasons for the successful (functioning) marketing research in Pezinok are similar to those in the Kremnica case; a motivated public relations manager with a professional background in marketing, and good co-operation with local students in distributing the questionnaires.

Inquiries

The Communicating Town Project brought to the Nová Baňa¹⁸ Town Council the very first research since 1990, when the local governments in Slovakia had been established. In Autumn, 1999, the Nová Baňa Town Council conducted a public opinion survey about satisfaction with information from the Town Council. They also used questions from the Communicating Town questionnaire, so any development of public opinion could be analyzed. (It had been arranged as an inquiry through the local newspaper). Although the Town Council had made mailboxes available for throwing in the inquiry letters in all groceries in the town, response was minimal; from 1 100 copies, just 21 citizens replied. [Bernátová, 2001]

It could be claimed that this failure says something about low citizen interest in local government and in communication with local authorities. Our strong feeling is that any inquiry method

using local newspapers as a main dissemination vehicle does not guarantee anywhere near an appropriate return of inquiry letters. The majority of the general public is not motivated enough to take inquiry letters and walk to find a letterbox.

It is, therefore, clearly not realistic to expect to gain an appropriate sample from this type of research. Inquiries could be better used for collecting comments, ideas, remarks, etc.—but they cannot be valid enough for learning public opinion if they do not use any established and accepted sampling methods. [Bernátová, Vaňová, 1999]

C

Other methods of an asking for and listening to public comments and suggestions to local government services.

Public Hearings

The public hearing is a special type of public meeting with specific rules and concrete topics. The chief aim of public hearings is to inform citizens about a project of the local government and find out citizens' attitudes towards it before any official council decision.

A difference between public meetings and public hearings can be explained as follows: in a public hearing, general discussions to learn public opinion is conducted with a great deal of official oversight. In a public meeting, the discussion is more "free". Public meetings, therefore, are more about informing the public. Public hearings are more about informing, then consulting with the public. Public hearings tend to center around any council decisions to be taken in the near future. Public meetings might or might not be organized after an official decision is made.

Besides the Environmental Impact Assessment process—when public hearings are an obligatory method of learning the public opinion, as mentioned in the previous part—public hearings can also be used as a method of consulting with citizens "voluntarily" about any other topic. Some local governments in Slovakia use this method regularly as input into local council decisions.

In the survey realized by IROMAR in 2000, we asked 66 local governments whether they had done any public hearings. (Responses referred to the period of the 1990–2000 period.) From 66 responses, 13 local governments stated that they had done public hearings at that time (20%). From 13 local governments, which have pursued public hearings, eight public hearings were aimed at land use plans, and seven public hearings were aimed at other problems.

As examples, we present three cases of "voluntary" public hearings, which have been used in three towns in Slovakia: Pezinok, Kremnica and Svit.

The first public hearings in Slovakia were organized by the Pezinok Town Council in 1997. The rules of a public hearing—procedural standards and agenda—are stated in the internal document

of the Town Council¹⁹. Initially, the Pezinok Town Council used to organize public hearings before each council meeting. At the public hearing meetings, about 25 to 30 citizens participated, which is a good number in comparison with most such meetings.

Later, as the number of local citizens decreased, the City Council decided to decrease the number of public hearings. They now organize them only when an important topic comes up (i.e., annual budgets, evaluations of cultural life in the town, etc.). Although previously the information before the public hearings had been distributed to the public, citizens did not visit some of the public hearings regularly. Very few citizens came to a public hearing about the Town Council budget for 2000. It therefore seems that the number of public hearings per year will decrease again.

As the Public Relations Manager of the Pezinok Town Council explains, this situation could be caused by a diversity of reasonable communication channels which the Pezinok Town Council uses, (i.e., the Town TV, local newspaper "Pezinèan", the Town Information Center), and also by a failure of a recent petition initiated by Pezinok citizens. A reason for the decrease of citizens' interest to participate in public hearings should be found out via specific research. (Bernátová, 2001)

In 1999, the Town Council in Kremnica started to organize public hearings, as well. They learned from the Pezinok model, and also brought in some of their own ideas. In 1999-2000, they organized four public hearings with specific topics: collection and separation of waste; reconstruction of the main square and improving the green parts of the town; youth recreation, and informing citizens of local government activities.

About 30 local people on average now participate at each public hearing. As in Pezinok, they distribute an invitation to public hearings to every household in the town. Besides the invitation, the leaflet offers brief information about the topics to be formally discussed. Before public hearings, the Kremnica Town Council also organized a public opinion survey about specific topics in a similar way.

An example of a comprehensive campaign for increasing the separation of household waste can be seen in Kremnica. Initially, they introduced the survey, then organized a public hearing on the same topic. With the help of these methods, the Town Council learned about people's major problems and comments in this field. As a result, the Council improved communications with the public by publishing a schedule of waste collection in the information bulletin. (Moreover, schedules are announced over the city loudspeaker system before each collection.) The results of the campaign have been positive –the amount of waste being separated has increased, and the results have been presented in the local newspaper.

In Svit²⁰, the Town Council organized 12 public hearings in 1999–2000. They were inspired by the Pezinok model, but the public hearings were arranged in smaller parts of the town (i.e.,

wards, streets, etc.). They used this method for consulting with the public on such topics as: problems and needs of youth, green, public parks and other green areas, public heating, etc.

The cases above show that in order to be successful in organizing public hearings, it is necessary to:

- Organize a good information campaign before each public hearing in order to inform and attract citizens to join the process;
- Ensure appropriate organization of the public hearing (i.e., choosing the right time, a professional moderator, a suitable venue, etc.);
- Consider results of public hearings as a real input to the council decision and informing inhabitants about them;
- Attempt to access possible solutions to related problems from different angles, and
- Compile and evaluate related qualitative and quantitative results.

Public Meetings

In the survey realized by IROMAR in 2000, we asked 66 local governments the same question: whether they had organized any public meetings. (Responses referred to the period of the last 10 years.) From 66 responses, 50 local governments stated that they had organized public meetings at that time, (76%).

Usually, local governments use this type of meeting as a method of consulting with citizens about any development problems, plans and aims, budgetary preparations, community problems, or as a general meeting of councilors with the public.

Public Discussions

In the same survey, we asked a question as to whether local governments had organized any public discussion. From 66 responses, 17 local governments stated that they had done so, (26%).

Usually, local governments use this type of discussion as a method of consulting with citizens about any development problems and aims.

Another Type of Personal Meetings

In the survey, we asked a question, whether local governments had organized any other personal meetings (round tables). From 66 responses, 19 local governments stated that they had done so, (30%).

Usually local governments use this type of meeting for discussions:

- with political bodies and parties—(10 local governments responding affirmatively);
- with firms and private sector—(three local governments responding affirmatively), and,
- regarding development problems—(six local governments responding affirmatively).

Encouraging Comments

In the survey conducted by IROMAR in 2000, we asked local governments what they used as a vehicle for inhabitants to comment on the council performance. Responses referred to the period of last 10 years. From 66 responses, only 25 answered this question:

- Seventeen local governments use telephone-lines (with or without answering machines).
- Two local governments use local message-boxes.
- One local government uses the local newspaper.
- Six local governments use personal meetings.

We also asked municipalities if they usually communicate with citizens via Internet or e-mail. From 66 responses, 61 answered this question. Eighteen local governments stated that they use Internet or e-mail; 43 do not.

From 18 local governments that use the Internet or e-mail:

- Three use e-mail for communication with inhabitants.
- Fourteen have web pages²¹.

The website named “local government” (www.samosprava.sk) contained 95 addresses to the local government websites in Slovakia at the time of writing. The websites are not extensively used by Slovak local governments, either for encouraging comments or for dealing with complaints.

However, more local governments, (mainly in smaller towns), have started to use local message-boxes, telephone-lines with answering machines, personal meetings, or e-mail as avenues for constituents to comment on their council’s performance. These methods give people more freedom to choose the time when they want to comment, and whether or not they want to reveal their names. In this way, the telephone line seems at first glance to be the most appropriate way of collecting comments, as a majority of inhabitants have access to it. It also gives people the best options regarding when they want to contact local officials.

In the following examples, we show the strengths and weaknesses of some of these methods.

The message boxes were used in Nová Baňa in the inquiry survey, however, without any special attention being paid to citizens’ real communications needs. But message boxes have been successfully used in the Pezinok Town Information Centre for collecting inquiry letters with votes for the Town Council competitions (i.e., for the best shop window of the year, etc.).

In Trenčín²², the Eco-line telephone service works as an answering machine. Local people can call when they discover any ecological damage in the town, and the service now receives about 60 phone-calls per month.

In comparison, a similar activity was organised in Kremnica. The Town Council introduced a telephone line with an answering machine. But they received almost no calls, although it was announced in the local newspaper and listed in the telephone directory. The problem could be a general distrust of answering machines of people in small towns, who tend to give more priority to personal communication. (E-mail is still not available for the majority of people in Slovakia. However, several local governments present e-mail addresses of their staff on their web sites.)

A success of the message boxes, telephone lines and e-mails as methods of complaining and commenting on local government performance depends on:

- The priorities of citizens, local traditions in ways of communication (both in general, and with local government);
- Continuous information about such possibilities by local government in appropriate communication channels,
- The presentation of an impact of this activity—how many messages were taken into consideration, or answered.

Social Partnership Networking

Local governments cannot work successfully without co-operating with other bodies in their towns or villages. Now more than before, they try to initiate activities to create networks or partnerships with other institutions, (mainly citizen's associations), from which they can learn much about their own performance. For example, the local governments in Pezinok, Kremnica and Krompachy²³ initiated and support citizen associations in their respective towns. In Zvolen²⁴, the council decided to allocate a small part of its budget to the citizen activities in one ward.

Analyses of Media

In many towns, the specialised officials of Town Councils monitor the local media and archive relevant findings. (However, we have not yet found any town that has taken the second step of analysing this data.)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Democratic institutions of local self-government have now been operating in Slovakia for over ten years. They have become an integral part of life in every village and town, and permanently influence citizens' identities and their attitudes to public affairs. For many people, work on local councils, and in their committees and executive organs, has been a valuable education in the workings of pluralist democracy.

By analyzing a number of different sources of information, particularly survey results, case studies, statistics and documents, we have tried to ascertain how profoundly the system of self-government has penetrated public consciousness.

The question of public perceptions has to be seen against the background of the political and economic changes that have taken place in Slovak society, which is in the process of transformation from a centrally-directed system of administration to a far more decentralised one.

In Slovakia, citizens' interest in the workings of self-government is still heavily influenced by the reform of the state administration. When it comes to issues of decentralisation, the starting point of every new government is its own ideas about the territorial division of the country and how competencies should be divided between the state administration and local self-government.

But the problem remains that there are still no regions which actually function as a higher level of self-government. In the public mind, the attempt at reform is a battle in the future territorial areas between political interest groups for power, and it is seldom viewed as a real chance for citizens to take part in public affairs. The expectation is that there will be structural changes in the location of state administrative bodies, rather than a fully-fledged system of self-government which will be capable of resolving citizens' own local problems.

At the time of writing (early 2001), local self-government is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation. This derives from having a large number of small municipalities that suffer from severely limited financial resources and a lack of qualified policy-makers. Yet in spite of this, there has been a noticeable shift in citizens' attitudes to local self-government since the fall of communism. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in the fact that there was a turnout of more than 50% in the three local elections (1990, 1994 and 1998). This can be considered an indication of their high expectations.

Public opinion surveys tend to show positive public reactions to the work of democratic institutions of self-government. If we look at respondents' social characteristics, we find that positive attitudes are particularly common among older citizens, people with higher educational levels who are more economically secure, and those who live in smaller municipalities. Institutions of self-government are viewed more positively than other institutions of government. Local representatives—most particularly the mayors, who are directly elected—evidently have managed to retain the public's trust, since a high percentage of them get re-elected.

An analysis of the mayors who are elected shows that independent candidates are often preferred over party candidates. When it comes to ordinary deputies, on the other hand, there is an increasing trend for voters to place their trust in party candidates. (Citizens also have a positive view of the formal institutions of local self-government. For example, they approve of both the existing electoral system, and the system of local referenda. They not only participate in local referenda, but also use their right to initiate them.)

In addition, it appears that citizens have an increasing interest in the meetings of their local councils, where decisions are made about the most important issues affecting life in the municipality. Business people have a particularly keen interest in attending council meetings. This

interest is frequently motivated by negative experiences with a tendency for corruption among local bureaucrats, and the fear that public officials may abuse their powers.

Although some behavior patterns inherited from the communist period still remain at the local level, it is possible to observe a shift in the relations between local politicians and the public. This is evident in efforts to make citizens better informed about what is happening in the municipality. Apart from holding public meetings, use is often made of notice boards, the local press, municipal radio and local television. (Larger towns have their own websites on the internet, as well.) All these media are also used for publicizing citizens' views about how to solve the problems of the village or town. Local mayors and councilors state that they are interested in finding out what citizens think about their work.

The result from the "Communicating Town" project showed that the flow of information and communication from the municipality towards its inhabitants seems to be the main factor for creating mutual trust. Individual surveys confirm the following fact; the less informed people are about the work of their municipality, the less satisfied they are with its work and the less trust they put in it. People in towns prefer leaflets or posters, which should be delivered to their post-boxes, and also information through the press, TV, and municipal broadcasting systems.

Less than half of the respondents answered the question on their interest in the work of the municipality. But those who responded suggested personal meetings with a mayor or councillors, and improved the promotion of municipal activities through local print media, local broadcasting, or TV.

In short, the relatively high degree of public trust in local self-government in Slovakia means that it is well-placed to become a strong and stable element in society. And when democratic institutions have been established on a regional level, they will help to strengthen the interaction between citizens and their elected representatives.

The presented cases and overall situation as learned from public opinion on local government in Slovakia show that there is a strong need for improving education in this field. Communicating with the public is a "hot" topic these days. But as to a number of programs or training programs and consultation methods with the public are still in a secondary position in this field. Education should be organized by different activities, such as: collecting and publishing the best cases of local government; training to learn new skills; workshops offering methods of preparing surveys and other methods of consulting with the public; seminars enabling presentations on recent relevant experiences, and consultations with professionals in the field.

This education should be oriented primarily towards local governments—both officials and councilors—in order to change their attitudes and learn new skills and practice from their successful counterparts, as well as to central government bodies. Second, education should be oriented towards the inhabitants to show them the practical advantages of local democracy as a whole, and how they can participate and effect local and national decisions.

This paper hopes to demonstrate that systematic research on the local level has not been done in this field. There is still no readily applicable methodology available focusing on ways for local governments to learn about public opinion trends. It would be very helpful if the mentioned educational activities were added to the overall planning in the field.

Below, recommendations for national, regional and local policies are presented in order to improve the public perception of local government in Slovakia.

At the national level, the government should speed up the implementation of public administration reform. The decentralization of power from state to regional level, and the strengthening of responsibilities of municipal self-governments, would strengthen the interest of citizens in taking part in deciding public affairs in the municipality and create conditions for the transparency and openness of public administration.

At the regional level, devolution of power would serve to reinforce democracy if regional representative bodies get significant power of their own. This should strengthen the interest of political parties in enhancing their regional policies and finally it might help to revitalize regional social and economic development. This development may also encourage the political parties to put more time and effort into the selection and preparation of their candidates for regional and local posts.

At the local level, conditions for an independent audit should be created under law in order to insure the independence of the auditor in opposition to the working of the present system, where the wage of the auditor is set by the municipal council on the suggestion of the mayor. This would strengthen the trust of citizens in local democracy.

In case of local referenda, it is necessary to create legislative guarantees in order to ensure that the results of the referenda are respected. Equally, it is necessary to create special rules to ensure the use of referenda for example in case of decisions concerning big investments in municipalities or regions. This could help avoid suspicions of corruption and getting the municipality into unbearable debts.

In towns, it is necessary to create a position of public relations manager responsible for communicating with the public, as this is a precondition for effective communication, as has been mentioned in several examples in this study.

At national, regional and local levels, we recommend:

- Commissioning public opinion surveys when launching new policies or pursuing old ones, during their implementation and monitoring. The surveys can then be used for learning and decision-making purposes;
- Supporting the training of public administration staff in the basics of social science methodology;

- Creating a system for motivating citizens to participate in the local government decision-making process concerning their lives;
- Informing the public about how the opinions of individual citizens factored into the final decision;
- Informing the public about prepared policies, their alternatives, and their impact on the society, and,
- Supporting an implementation of the Act of Freedom in Access to Information with the aim to enhance transparency within public administration, without any obstacles created by public administration towards public access to information.

Further research on different aspects of public perception of local governments—including on ways of communicating with the public, and forms of participation by the public in the decision-making process of local, regional, and central governments—would be necessary as a basis for enhancing the knowledge of the present situation. This would also go a long way in improving the decentralisation process in Slovakia.

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NOTES

- ¹ This list of functions is published in : Nemeč, J.–Bercik, P.–Kuklis, P. (2000): Local government in Slovakia. In : Horvath, T.M.(ed.): Decentralisation : Experiments and Reforms. Budapest : OSI/LGI, pp. 305–306.
- ² Foretová, V.–Foret, M. (1996): Communicating city (Komunikující město). Brno, 1996. p. 8.
- ³ As a source for part B of this chapter, results and experience are used from “Communicating Town” project held in 1996–2000, funded by the Open Society Foundation, IROMAR (Institute for Municipal and Regional Development, Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.) pursued public opinion surveys among inhabitants in 10 Slovak towns (See Appendix 1). An aim of the research was to assess public opinion on councils’ activities, and communication techniques, and on living conditions in respective towns. After that, interviews in participating towns were led to find out ways of communication with public they have been using. The survey was conducted by surveying randomly selected inhabitants in questionnaire form of standard personal talks on the sample, (i.e. people older than 18 years.) See: Vaňová, A. (2001). In: Bernátová, M., et al.: Komunikujúce mesto. (*Communicating Town*). Banská Bystrica: IROMAR EF UMB a OSF. mimeo.
- ⁴ Data from national referendum held in November 2000.
- ⁵ A survey of mayors in Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics was organised in 1999 as a part of international Local Democracy and Innovation Project sponsored by the Norwegian government. The questionnaire collected attitudes of mayors from the three countries concerning problems with implementation of local government reforms in the post-communist environments in Poland and in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. See in: Offerdal, A. (1999).
- ⁶ Information from www.changenet.sk—a server on the nonprofit organisations in Slovakia
- ⁷ www.changenet.sk.
- ⁸ The project “Improving Public Relations in Local Government in Slovakia”—led by IROMAR in 1999–2001 and financed by the British Know-How Fund—has been helping to eight local governments in Slovakia in improving their public relations in their specific activities.
- ⁹ As they were interested in public relations, we could have supposed that they had been more sophisticated local governments in terms of communicating with the public.
- ¹⁰ Findings of this (later) survey will be presented in the following chapter, under specific topics.
- ¹¹ Bernátová, M. (2000). “Communicating with the Public—the First Step Towards Meeting Inhabitants Needs by Local Government. An Experience from Slovakia.” A paper presented at the 8th NISPAcee Annual Conference “Ten Years of Transition: Prospects and Challenges of the Future for Public Administration”. Budapest, April 2000.

- ¹² Slovak National Council Act No.369/1990 on Municipalities.
- ¹³ See Slovak National Council Act No. 50/1976 and its amendments and Švihlová, D.–Wilson, E. (1999): *Obce a životné prostredie*. Banská Bystrica, IROMAR EF UMB and British KHF and www.changenet.sk/poradna/streetlaw/rozhod.htm.
- ¹⁴ Notification 150/1958, Act 100/1960, Act 85/1990 and www.changenet.sk/poradna/streetlaw/rozhod.htm.
- ¹⁵ A town in central Slovakia of c. 5 800 inhabitants.
- ¹⁶ At present, we consider it a success when local government applies public opinion learning techniques in properly, continuously, or regularly, and takes the results into consideration in their policy design.
- ¹⁷ A town in western Slovakia of c. 21 800 inhabitants.
- ¹⁸ A town in central Slovakia of c. 7 600 inhabitants.
- ¹⁹ Verejné vypočutia—zovšeobecnený a aktualizovaný pracovný postup. Mesto Pezinok—Mestský úrad. 1997. Published also in: Bernátová, M.–Vaňová, A. (2000): *Marketing pre samosprávy II.—Komunikácia s verejnosťou. (Marketing for Local Governments II.—Communication with the Public)*. Banská Bystrica: IROMAR and the British Know-How Fund.
- ²⁰ A town in eastern Slovakia of c. 7 500 inhabitants.
- ²¹ On web pages, comments to local government performance could be asked for. This question was not posed in this survey.
- ²² A town in western Slovakia, c. 59 000 inhabitants.
- ²³ A town in eastern Slovakia, c. 8 500 inhabitants.
- ²⁴ A town in central Slovakia, c. 44 400 inhabitants.

APPENDIX 1

The following table gives an overview of individual towns which took part in the “Communicating Town” project. Ten towns were involved in the project and 3,435 fully filled-in questionnaires were processed. That represents an interesting sample with a good statistical base for assessing conditions in Slovakia, a nation of approximately five million people.

Table 5A.1

The List of the Towns Participating in the “Communicating Town” Project

Town	Number of Inhabitants	Number of Delivered Questionnaires	Number of Returned Questionnaires
Kremnica	5 868	400	326
Nová Baňa	7 638	400	336
Pezinok	21 819	500	419
Košice–Ľahanovce	22 000	500	413
Lučenec	28 865	400	255
Zvolen	44 386	400	317
Trenčín	59 078	400	363
Banská Bystrica	84 000	400	255
Prešov	93 046	400	386
Bratislava	450 000	800	365
Total			3 435

SOURCE: authors' independent research

APPENDIX 2

Table 5A.2
Local Election Results (1990)

Party	Percentage of All Mayors in Slovakia	Number of Districts Where Party Had Most Mayors	Percentage of All Councilors in Slovakia
Without party affiliation	25.8	15	15.8
VPN	17.5	7	20.4
KDH	19.9	7	27.4
KSS–SDL	24.2	9	13.6
Spolužitie (ESWS)	3.7	1	6.3
SNS	1.6	0	3.2
MKDH	1.3	0	3.0
MNI	1.0	0	1.3
Other	5.0	0	9.0
Total	100.0	39	100.0

SOURCE: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

Table 5A.3
Local Elections Results (1994)

Party	Percentage of All Mayors in Slovakia	Number of Districts Where Party Had Most Mayors	Percentage of All Councilors in Slovakia	Number of Districts Where Party Had Most Council Seats
Independent	29.4	24	9.0	1
SDL	17.9	6	15.7	3
HZDS	15.9	2	22.8	15
KDH	14.8	6	19.7	12
Spolužitie	4.7	2	6.3	5
ESWS	2.5	0	4.6	0

Table 5A.3 (continued)
Local Elections Results (1994)

Party	Percentage of All Mayors in Slovakia	Number of Districts Where Party Had Most Mayors	Percentage of All Councilors in Slovakia	Number of Districts Where Party Had Most Council Seats
HPTHE	2.2	0	3.3	0
Slovak Republic	2.2	0	2.3	0
DS	2.1	0	3.7	0
MOS–MPP	2.1	0	2.4	0
SNS	2.0	0	3.9	2
KSU	0.7	0	1.2	0
MKDH	3.8	0	5.2	0
DU				
Other				
Total	100.0	40*	100.0	38

* two political parties gained the most mayors in a single district

SOURCE: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Table 5A.4
Local Election Results (1998)

Party	Percentage of All Mayors in Slovakia	Percentage of All Councilors in Slovakia
Independent	28.2	9.0
HZDS	20.8	23.0
SDL	13.8	16.3
KDH	7.6	12.1
SMK	7.7	10.6
SNS	3.9	6.0
SOP	2.2	2.3
DS	2.1	3.7

Table 5A.4 (continued)
Local Election Results (1998)

Party	Percentage of All Mayors in Slovakia	Percentage of All Councilors in Slovakia
DU	2.1	2.4
Others	11.6	14.6
Total	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: Statistical office of the Slovak Republic.

HZDS—Movement for Democratic Slovakia,

SDL—Party of Democratic Left,

KDH—Christian Democratic Movement,

SNS—Slovak National Party,

SOP—Party of Civic Understanding,

DS—Democratic Party,

DU—Democratic Union,

VPN—Public Against Violence,

HPSR—Movement of Agrarians of the Slovak Republic,

KSU—Christian Social Union,

MKDH, ESWS, SMK, MNI, MOS–MPP—ethnic Hungarian political parties.

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Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative

Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative (LGI), as one of the programs of the Open Society Institute (OSI), is an international development and grant-giving organization dedicated to the support of good governance in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Newly Independent States (NIS). LGI seeks to fulfill its mission through the initiation of research and support of development and operational activities in the fields of decentralization, public policy formation and the reform of public administration.

With projects running in countries covering the region between the Czech Republic and Mongolia, LGI seeks to achieve its objectives through

- Development of sustainable regional networks of institutions and professionals engaged in policy analysis, reform oriented training, and advocacy;
- Support and dissemination of in-depth comparative and regionally applicable policy studies tackling local government issues;
- Support of country specific projects and delivery of technical assistance to the implementation agencies;
- Assistance to Soros foundations with the development of local government, public administration and/or public policy programs in their countries of the region;
- Publishing of books, studies and discussion papers dealing with the issues of decentralization, public administration, good governance, public policy, and lessons learnt from the process of transition in these areas;
- Development of curricula and organization of training programs dealing with specific local government issues;
- Support of policy centers and think-tanks in the region.

Apart from its own projects, LGI works closely with a number of other international organizations (Council of Europe, Department for International Development, USAID, UNDP, and World Bank) and co-funds larger regional initiatives aimed at the support of reforms on sub-national level. Local Government Information Network (LOGIN) and Fiscal Decentralization Initiatives (FDI) are two main examples of this cooperation.

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