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BUILDING OF REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN SLOVAKIA: THE FIRST DECADE

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Building of regional self-government in Slovakia: the first decade.

This contribution summarizes and evaluates the first ten years of regional self-government development in Slovakia. It is based on an extensive study of legislation, institutional structures, regional self-governments documents, electoral results and financial data. This study also reacts to the lack of research focused on regional self-government compared to the local and national government in Slovakia in the last decade. During this period, regional self-government built its institutional structures, obtained many executive powers, and strengthened its financial position. It also devoted a lot of effort to successful integration into the selected fields of European policy-making. Other additional aspects confirm a quite systematic progress in its formation as a fully developed level of government. Nevertheless, there are still some limits. The main issues concern the legitimacy of elected bodies challenged by the low electoral participation, lack of resources available for their own initiatives, a still poor availability of EU funds combined with a minor role in regional development. Ten years seems too short a period for building a fully respected tier of government.

Key words: regional self-government, Europeanization, institutions, legitimacy, powers, finances, regional development, Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

A dual model of public administration (two separate lines – the state administration and self-government) has been practiced in Slovakia since 1990. Despite the on-going debate, regions re-emerged as a level of political and territorial organization of the country only in 1996, though only as state-administration bodies. Eight regional offices (in Slovak – krajský úrad) were established to administer the set of powers that had been de-concentrated from the central State. The first regional elections were held in December 2001, followed by the start of regional self-government in January 2002. Almost ten years provide a sufficient time to evaluate the position, achievements or failures of regional self-government in Slovakia. The first period (2002-2005) of its existence can be interpreted as a "starting and transitional" phase dealing with the practical issues of its establishment (buildings, staff, property), coping with more stages of power transfers (mostly from the regional-state administration) and circumscribed by the lack of autonomy in financial matters. The second period of "maturing" (2005-2009) focused on the building of "regions" as a more respected and efficient level of government. During this period, it built institutional structures, obtained many executive powers, and strengthened its financial position. The earlier developed regional and district offices of the state administration as the main institutional competitors were phased out (in 2007, or 2004) leaving more space for the activity of regional self-government. Their set

of residual powers was transferred to the regional self-governments, the local state administration in the centres of regions, and to the specialized field offices of certain ministries. Within less than a decade, regional self-government started to be an understandable formal dominant player at the intermediate level of the territorial and political organization in Slovakia. A quite systematic progress in its formation as a fully developed level of government is observable. Nevertheless, there are still some limits and ten years seem too short a period for building of a fully respected tier of government.

The regional level of the government, thanks to its growing importance over the last two decades, has attracted the attention of many scholars. As early as 1997, Keating pointed out that regionalism was back in fashion in Europe as expressed in books and articles about the new regionalism, multilevel governance, or the third "meso" level of government. It documents an extensive debate on regional government/governance in Western Europe and the United States (e.g. Keating 1997, Herrschel and Newman 2000). Following the progress in transformation of societies, this attention has expanded to the post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries. Surazska et al. (1997), Wollman (1997), Jordan (2003), Brusis (2005), and O'Dwyer (2006) were among many authors who have focused on the regional level of public administration. Nevertheless, most of these papers focused on the development in the 1990's and during the early years of this decade. Among the less frequent latest contributions are those of Bruszt (2008), Pálne Kovács (2009), and Pitschel and Bauer (2009). Most of these contributions also analysed to a certain extent developments in this field in Slovakia.

The scientific debate on the regional level of government focused on more issues and circumstances in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. One of the older impetuses for the sub national government development based on the preservation of the historic, ethnic, cultural and language roots of subnational entities, emphasized, for example, by Hebbert (1984), and Rodrigues-Pose and Gill (2003) was less reflected. Nevertheless, this aspect concerning the regional level is hard to avoid in the more multi-ethnic Central East European states (see e.g. Buček 2003 and Batt 2003). The attention paid to the intermediate level of the government as part of the post-socialist transformation and transition processes is quite understandable. It included decentralization and de-concentration, as well as building of regional institutions, as the most frequent topics (e.g. Surazska et al. 1997 and Wollman 1997). Very extensive has been the attention paid to the conditionality and Europeanization of regional self-government building. As Sadurski (2004) mentioned, only after 1997 did the Commission, as well as other EU bodies, begin to explicitly press for regionalization. However, this de-concentration of selected powers to regional administration was not sufficient. The European Union's institutions and documents were much more demanding and pressed for more democratic, accountable, directly elected bodies on the regional level. More studies discussed, for example, the question to what extent such conditionality has been influenced by domestic politics (e.g. Hughes et al. 2003 and O'Dwyer 2006). The economic dimension of regional government is very frequently emphasized (e.g. Rodrigues-Pose and Sandall 2008). The transfer of power to the intermediate level should improve and mobilize capacities to deal with regional development and to act successfully in

reducing regional disparities. Among other usual issues, governance based approaches (e.g. Stoker 1998) assuming an important role for regional government should not be forgotten. One meaning follows the multilevel governance vision stressing the participation of regional self-government in the supranational – the European level of policy (often considered as one aspect of Europeanization). As summarized by Pitschel and Bauer (2009), sub-national actors in bigger states as well as those with a large range of powers are more active towards the EU level policy. Some authors considering regional governance (e.g. Danson et al. 2000 and Norris 2001) have focused on the political processes and policy making on the regional level recognizing that social and economic development in regions is not the sole responsibility of the regional or central governments, but it is the responsibility of many organizations in partner interactions.

The aim of this paper is not only to provide an updated evaluation of the basic constitutional and legislative environment, institutional structure, powers, and finances of regional self-government in Slovakia. This ground serves as a starting point for identification of the achievements as well as the failures in their functioning, respecting the above mentioned approaches in regional government studies. From the perspective of multi-level governance, arguments are provided in an attempt to answer the question as to whether a strong, well-developed, competitive regional self-government (in comparison to local, national, or even supra-national levels of government) has already been built in Slovakia. For this reason, the study focuses on the accuracy and sufficiency of the constitutional and legal guarantees in functioning of regional self-government. The strength of regional self-government influences the scope of its powers, as well as the completeness of its institutional structures. During the first decade of functioning, one of the key issues has been the legitimacy of regional bodies in relation to the low participation at regional elections. Changes in the financial situation are also important for the evaluation of the autonomous functioning of regional self-government. This is an intrinsic factor of a true level of government. Later sections reflect one possible interpretation of the Europeanization of regional self-government. This paper does not deal with the prevailing insight emphasizing the role of the EU in the initiation or strengthening of regional government. The contrary processes of regional self-government's integration into European policy-making understood, for example, as activities that influence Brussels institutions, interregional cooperation, and the management of the Structural Funds seems more important.

This paper also reacts to the lack of research focusing on regional self-government compared to local self-government, or national government levels in Slovakia. Paradoxically, attention decreased after reforms and the institutionalization of regional self-government. The rare exceptions are Buček (2002 and 2003) Klimovský (2006 and 2009) or Tvrdoň and Kmecová (2007). This paper does not pay attention to other important issues in relation to the regional self-government agenda as diverse as the social and economic situation in regions, regional development, cross-border cooperation, and regional governance. Most of such issues are well covered by many authors, for example Buček (1999), Kling (2003), Halás (2005), Korec (2005), Valentovič (2006) and Gajdoš (2008). Attention will be also given to processes and issues related to the early stages of the development of the regional public administration structure during

the nineties. This contribution also does not reflect the debates concerning the regional dimension of territorial administrative divisions in Slovakia that predominantly attracted geographers (e.g. Slavík 2000 and Bezák 1998). The main source of information was a wide variety of documents and statistical data (e.g. electoral) including legislation, press releases, official documents of the central and regional governments. The financial information is based on the final balance sheets of the Slovak Republic (Ministry of Finance 2004-2010).

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL DEVELOPMENT

Constitutional arrangements are very significant for any level of government. They define its role, relations to other governance levels, basic institutions, etc. Understanding of these arrangements provides a useful framework for deeper insights into its functioning, as well documented by Herschel and Newman (2000), and Sadurski (2004). The insufficient constitutional and legal environment (besides political reasons) was a very important barrier to its introduction into practice for more than ten years after 1990 in Slovakia. Before 2001, the constitution did not offer a reliable basis for the full-scale introduction of viable regional self-government. The Constitution-amendment processes completed in 2001 clarified the most crucial issues needed for the stable constitutional backing of regional self-government. Due to the political will to introduce regional self-government, it was immediately followed by adoption of the more detailed legal framework, (which included concerning institutional structure, elections, property and financing, regional development, transfers of powers and soon). The last crucial limit concerning the more autonomous functioning of regions was resolved by the legislation of fiscal decentralization (adopted in 2004). Further legislative developments significantly improved the position of regional self-government on the intermediate level of public administration by the substantial reduction of the regional state administration. The character of the introduction of regional government demonstrates the top-down approach controlled by the current central state dominant political parties. Successful pressure from below leading, for example, to deeper changes in legislation in favour of regional self-government is still absent.

The Slovak Constitution (in its first wording as adopted in 1992) expressed the basic political will to have one of the key levels of the government on the regional level. Its section addressing the territorial self-government was rather concise in terms of defining the position of regional self-government (mentioned neutrally as "self-governments of higher territorial units"), stating that it would be subsequently defined by legislation. The Constitution did not guarantee any rights, responsibilities, or autonomy. The position of the intermediate level was thus very vulnerable. Any introduction of self-governed regions could face serious difficulties in social practice. A simple majority in the Slovak Parliament could have changed all principal conditions of their functioning. The most critical part was the uncertainty whether, under the existing constitutional arrangement, a regional self-government could adopt its own legislation and under what conditions this could be done.

Fully functioning regional self-government was included in the main goals of the public administration reform implemented by M. Dzurinda's government

after 1998. The lack of constitutional backing for the regional level was changed by the amendment to the constitution approved in February 2001. Regional self-government was put in an equal position compared the local self-government. Both levels were defined as separate legal entities, not accountable to each other. It defines the main institutions, basic rights, principles of democracy, and the level of autonomy. The Constitution now also allows a transfer of some delegated powers from the state to regional self-government. However, there are no constitutional guarantees concerning the solid and stable financial base (or even financial autonomy). The last important constitutional change concerns the powers of the Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic (in Slovak – Najvyšší kontrolný úrad SR), as an independent external audit institution. Previously, it could act only in relation to financial resources and property serving, to execute delegated powers. Since 2006, the Supreme Audit Office has been able to supervise all financial and property operations of local and regional self-government, including their organizations and enterprises.

In fact, the first legal act related to the introduction of the post-communist regional self-government was adopted in 1996. It concerned the territorial and administrative organization of the country (Act No. 221/1996 coll.). It defined regions as the basic administrative units of the country divided into districts. It introduced new divisions of the country into 8 administrative regions and 79 districts, as the basic condition for the functioning of the regional state-administration. An attempt to change this territorial organization in favour of 12 regions was not accepted by the Slovak Parliament in 2001. A massive wave of legislation followed the above mentioned Constitutional amendment in 2001 (for example Acts Nos. 302, 303, 416 and 503/2001). They defined a more detailed framework for the functioning of regional self-government as presented later in this paper.

As a result, regional self-government is a legal entity with its own property and own income operating on behalf of its own population. It has been guaranteed autonomous decision-making in the field of self-government. Duties and limitations of regional self-governments can be introduced only by legislation. They can approve by-laws in the field of self-government competencies, as well as by-laws within the legal framework of delegated powers. The consistence of regional legislation (by-laws) with national legislation is considered by the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court also decides on unconstitutional or illegal interventions of the State into the regions' right to self-government. One of the important rights of regional council is a call for referenda in matters concerning self-governmental powers. A referendum is also called when required by more than 30% of all registered voters. However, this opportunity has not been used so far. One of the main barriers is the requirement for the participation of at least 50% of voters. With the current level of participation in regional elections, there is very little chance to call a successful, that is valid, referendum.

REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT INSTITUTION BUILDING

Regional self-government already has a clarified and stabilized basic institutional arrangement (chairpersons, councils, and office structure). Nevertheless, the longer practice of their functioning brings new developments and innovations into their organization. Great attention has been paid to the positions of vice-chairpersons, council commissions, and the structure of executive offices. The regional self-governments are also active in the formation of partnership-based institutions such as regional development agencies. The progress in institutional building is demonstrated by the longer term functioning of the "K8" – Association of Regional Chairpersons and the formation of their office. A similar innovation is the building of contact offices outside the seats of the regional authorities.

There are two main institutions – the Regional Council (in Slovak – zastupiteľstvo samosprávneho kraja) and the Regional Chairperson (in Slovak – predseda samosprávneho kraja). The number of councillors is calculated in the ratio of 12,000 to 15,000 citizens per councillor. A key representative and decision-making body of a regional authority is the regional council. While the standard decisions of regional councils need the consent of a simple majority of attending councillors, the regional by-laws must be adopted by three fifths of all councillors. Other important decisions/documents of the regional councils include the principles of own property management, approval of the programme of economic and social development, regional territorial plans, budget and final account, establishing legal entities of regional self-government (naming of executive managers), and the membership of the region in associations. It also elects a vice chairperson from the councillors, establishes commissions and elects their members, elects the chief auditor (internal), and establishes the office of the regional authority. Councillors are mostly employed in their normal citizens' work, but they obtain special financial reward. They have specific rights, defined by the legislation, including the right to submit proposals or to ask private as well as public sector entities for information. Councillors cannot be employees of the self-governmental region.

Commissions are the main working organizational units of the regional councils. The initial obligatory legislature had required two commissions of regional councils – mandate and financial. Since 2004, the regional councils have had to introduce only one obligatory commission dealing with the protection of public interests during the execution of public positions by the public office-holders. However, each regional council has established quite a large number of commissions reflecting mostly the main competencies (such as planning, education, health, culture, social affairs, regional development, tourism, and finance), regional priorities (e.g. business environment and investments, international co-operation) and important issues (e.g. ethnic minorities). Their number is between nine (Bratislava and Žilina regions), and thirteen commissions (Košice and Nitra regions) in 2010. While the mandate commission can consist only of elected councillors, other commissions can also include non-elected members approved by the regional council. More than half of the members of such a commission must be councillors, including the chairperson of the commission.

Due to the larger number of commissions, it is not unusual that one councillor is a member of several commissions. The largest commissions in some regions have 15-19 members (usually the largest are financial commissions). We can observe a reasonable trend towards reducing and stabilizing the number of commissions, as well as a reduction in their size.

The regional chairperson is directly elected, s/he represents the region toward other entities, and holds statutory rights. S/he can suspend decisions made by the council if they appear to be in a conflict with valid legislation. In such situations, the council must decide again on such issues by the majority of all members. S/he calls all commission chairs for a meeting usually once a month. The regional chairperson is directly supported by the administrative staff, in some cases also including other specific powers (e.g. the crises management unit, the management of the EU funds related projects, and international relations). Althoug the original aim was to have only one vice chairperson in each region, most regions now have two or three vice-chairpersons (for example, the Bratislava and Nitra regions have three Vice-Chairpersons). They are elected from among councillors following the political negotiations. Each is responsible for a certain part of the regional self-government agenda, sometimes also for a certain territorial part of the region.

The executive arm of the regional authority is its office, managed by the director of the office (in Slovak – riaditeľ úradu). The number of office employees has been growing systematically reflecting the increasing extent of powers. While at the end of the first electoral period it was about 100-120 employees, it grew to more than 200 employees in large regions in 2009-2010. Due to the financial crisis, most regional authorities announced staff reductions of between 5-10 per cent. The internal structure of regional offices is not uniform and it depends on the decision of councillors. They usually have a departmental structure according to the main powers of the regions and management tasks (such as property administration, finance, and human resources). The structure of offices arranged into departments also confirms the expansion of powers. While in the middle of the decade, some offices had only six departments (e.g. Bratislava and Prešov regions), their number increased mostly to 9 and 11 in 2011 (Žilina, Bratislava and Banská Bystrica regions). Among later added departments there are departments focusing on the implementation of the Regional Operation Programmes. Despite expectations, the regional authorities did not have significant problems in the successful takeover of transferred competences. In many cases, they hired staff experienced in state administration and built up their offices quickly (Kling 2004). Each of the regional authoritie an internal chief auditor of its own (in Slovak – hlavný kontrolór). S/he is elected by the regional council for six years. S/he supervises the execution of the regional authority's tasks, especially financial flows and the effectiveness of the operation and use of property. They are employees of the regional authorities, which are obliged to provide them with reasonable conditions for independent functioning. They are part of the Regional Office, working as small office units.

With the passing of time, numerous organizations emerged with the direct involvement of regional self-government. The majority are composed of legal entities operating in a particular field of regional self-government powers (e.g. social care, road administration and maintenance, hospitals, and secondary

schools). As a new development, the Prešov regional authority in co-operation with local government, opened its branch office in Poprad in 2010 (the Mayor of Poprad is also vice-chairperson of this region). It should serve as a contact place for the western part of the region (including the meetings with councillors), and a similar branch office is planned in the eastern part of the region in Humenné.

The specific cases of co-operation and partnership in favour of regional development are regional development agencies (RDAs). They are multi-partner bodies, combining private, public, and non-profit interests in support of the regional development. Their number increased to 52 in 2010 (compared, for example, to 43 in 2007); they cover all regions, and are located in larger Slovak cities. The greatest number of RDAs is in the Prešov region (12). They have been financially supported from the state budget on a contract principle since 2000 within the framework of the integrated network of RDAs scheme The Ministry of Construction and Regional Development provided the RDAs with EUR 7.7 mil for their operation during 2000-2010 (Backová 2010). Their functioning follows the regional development legislation concerning the non-profit organizations. Some are well established most of the regional authorities strongly influence their activities (e.g. RDA of the Trnava region). Besides the regional authorities the regional development agencies usually include the municipalities, regional associations of towns and communes, associations of entrepreneurs, regional chambers of commerce, important corporations, universities and so on. The main fields of their activities are consultations on the regional development and preparation of projects for the structural funds, as well as project implementation.

The role of the "Association of Self-Ggovering Regions SK8" (in Slovak – Združenie samosprávnych krajov SK8) is increasing. It was established after the first electoral period of regional self-government.The leaders in this initiative are the chairpersons of all the regions. They meet together quarterly (more often if needed) and debate important issues of their functioning. Each chairperson is responsible for a particular field of action/powers (Prešov region 2010). This association is now quite important in protecting the interests of regional self-government. It has developed into a respected partner of the central state and other social partners (TASR 2010). The association frequently co-ordinates its activities with the associations of local self-government. Future plans include the establishment of its own permanent office with selected tasks and responsibilities (e.g. concerning the joint House of Slovak Regions in Brussels).

CHALLENGES TO THE LEGITIMACY OF REGIONAL BODIES

Two main aspects threatened the legitimacy of regional bodies over the last decade – low participation in their elections and the less standard political behaviour of political parties. Low participation in regional elections has confirmed the weaker role of regions compared to local and central state levels. During the first years of functioning, the legitimacy of the regional bodies, and especially regional chairpersons, has been disputable. Their legitimacy was only slightly improved by the electoral participation in the recent 2009 elections. In a similar way, the blurred electoral coalition and the regional council coalitions

shifted to more standard electoral and governmental coalitions, although with a new element of complication – independent regional councillors. Despite such shortcomings, there are good signs of the building of regional self-government legitimacy and a standard democratic political environment. The question of whether a different electoral model (a lot of votes are lost) and/or combination of regional election with other elections could improve participation is a matter of longer discussion.

There are indications that the second part of this decade has confirmed the increased importance of the role of regional self-government within society. It seems that stabilization of powers and completion of fiscal decentralization, as well as more active policy involvement, have led to higher respect on the side of the public. It also became an attractive political field. Regional chairpersons are becoming influential political actors and this has attracted several mayors of the biggest cities and some members of parliament to compete for these positions (in 2009 five chairpersons with experience in the Slovak Parliament were elected, one with experience as the mayor of the second largest Slovak city, Košice, the others were longer term serving chairpersons). The regional councils are also attractive for numerous mayors, vice-mayors, and regional representatives of the political parties. According to Krivý (2006 and 2010), who summarized the composition of all newly elected regional councils, we can find there 26.7 percent of mayors and 4.4 percent of members of Parliament (2009 elections). The regional self-government bodies, as well as their offices, started to be highly politicized from its establishment. The criteria for the selection of administrative staff are more political and less professional, especially on the level of department heads. The distribution of the regional council commissions chairs is also an outcome of political negotiations. However, certain signs of cooperation across the political spectrum are also evident in attempts to resolve the problems of regions.

There were three regional elections held in 2001, 2005 and 2009. All followed the same electoral rules (Act 303/2001 Coll.). While the number of elected chairpersons is stable (8), the number of regional councillors decreased in the 2009 election from the previous 412 to 408 councillors (the number of councillors in the Bratislava region was reduced, while the number of seats in the Nitra region was increased). Regional chairpersons are elected directly in a two-round majority system. The two best first-round candidates compete for the majority in the second round. Regional councillors are elected by the majority system in multi-mandate electoral districts. Voters select the number of candidates from the candidate lists as determined for their electoral district. Candidates represent the registered political parties, their coalitions, or can be independent candidates (a petition is required – 400 signatures in the case of a council candidacy, and 1 000 signatures in the case of a chairperson election).

The participation in regional elections very well documents the weaker position of the regional self-government in Slovakia. Its unclear role at the beginning and the experience gathered in the first period of its functioning did not attract voters for larger electoral participation. Table 1 shows very low participation in the introductory 2001 elections. However, the 2005 elections were even less attractive to voters. Participation in the second round achieved an extremely low 11 per cent. It is far less than in the local elections (47.7 per cent in

2006), or the parliamentary elections (54.7 per cent in 2006). In practice, it meant that, for instance, the regional chairperson in the Trenčín region was elected in 2005 thanks to the support of a meagre 3.63 per cent of the total voters (or 17,561 votes as an absolute number). The situation in other regions was only slightly better (e.g. in the Trnava region the elected chairperson obtained only 5.1 per cent of the total votes). It challenged the legitimacy of the elected chairperson seriously, as well as highlighting the marginal role of the regions in Slovak political life. It also reflected the general perception of this level as less visible, less powerful, and having less resources and initiative. There was also a lack of mobilization of votes in the 2005 elections compared to the 2001 elections, caused by ethnic mobilization in the second round of the election in some regions with competition between Slovak and Hungarian candidates for the position of regional chairperson (see Buček 2003). A certain positive shift is evident in the third regional elections (2009), in which participation somewhat increased, especially in the second round. However, we need more elections to verify the slowly expanding perception of regions and to confirm the growing perception regarding the influence of regional chairpersons.

Region	2001	2001	2005	2005	2009	2009
	First round	Second round	First round	Second round	First round	Second round
Bratislavský kraj	23.96	n.a.*	14.45	10.72	19.46	20.18
Trnavský kraj	33.73	36.87	14.50	9.41	20.46	n.a.*
Trenčiansky kraj	21.55	16.17	12.30	7.12	20.59	15.77
Nitriansky kraj	34.69	39.49	27.67	16.19	21.81	n.a.*
Žilinský kraj	23.47	10.85	15.69	9.19	23.68	18.01
Banskobystrický kraj	24.16	19.92	18.65	10.65	27.06	19.22
Prešovský kraj	25.50	18.37	19.47	13.2	26.31	n.a.*
Košický kraj	21.79	18.06	19.27	10.82	22.93	n.a.*
Slovak Republic	26.02	22.61	18.02	11.07	22.90	18.39

* regional chairperson elected in first round

Tab. 1. Participation in regional elections (in %)
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2010. Regional election statistics.

Regions have become increasingly recognized as another political arena for the nationwide political parties, while regional political parties are absent. Regional structures of the nation-wide political parties obtained a wide scope of autonomy, clearly visible in the formation of coalitions that in many cases cross the traditional political barriers. This was accompanied by the reduced resources from political parties' national centres for the regional election campaigns. Formation of a coalition is typical political behaviour at the regional level. Despite the elevated number of political parties in Slovakia, they prefer to form larger

blocks to improve their chances of better election results (coalitions of three and four parties were the most frequent and successful ones). However, these electoral coalitions did not continue to exist for long in many cases, since they faced different political stances during the practical work of the regional councils. Such instability and the practice of complicated compensations among political parties complicate the functioning of regional bodies. There are also situations when coalitions for council-elections have not been respected for the election of a chairperson (parties put forward their own candidates, but not the joint chairperson candidate). The extensive autonomy of regional organizations of political parties led to atypical coalitions, breaking the traditional political divisions in the first two regional elections. It reflects a more realistic approach of party organizations on this level with the goal of maximizing mandates. It was quite common that parties composing a coalition in a regional council are in opposition on the floor of the national Parliament. Despite this, a prevailing tendency of political parties with similar programmes to cooperate is increasing. Klimovský (2006) noted closer cooperation by the groups of parties – right-centre parties (SDKU-DS, KDH and some smaller ones), a group of parties including SMER/SD with HZD and SNS, and the leader in the third group has been HZDS (for an explanation of the Slovak political environment see the notes at the end of the paper). This trend to form large "blocks" was confirmed by the third regional elections. The coalitions in the 2009 regional elections were more natural and atypical coalitions almost disappeared. The two main blocks were the right of centre parties (SDKU-DS, KDH with other small parties) and at that time governmental centre-left block of parties (SMER/SD and HZDS). Less frequent members of large coalitions were for example SNS and SMK/MKP. The situation in the administrative region of Nitra is specific. It was dominated in the 2005 and 2009 elections by the so-called Slovak Coalition – a coalition of all the main Slovak political parties (as a counterweight to the then leading political party of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, SMK/MKP, that dominated this region during the first electoral period). A decrease in participation in this region documents some degree of demotivation of voters to vote within the framework of ethnic divisions.

We can conclude that the earlier atypical electoral coalitions, their unclear goals, and value base probably influenced the lower level of electoral participation in the first and second regional elections. More standard and understandable coalitions might have positively influenced increased electoral participation in the 2009 elections and future elections. A different reaction to the political parties' behaviour is the growing share of elected independent candidates. While in the 2005 elections there were only 39 independent councillors (9.5 per cent), in 2009 55 independent candidates (13.5 per cent) were elected. However, in two regions their share in the Regional Council composition already exceeded 20 per cent (Trenčín and Košice regions).

MAIN POWERS OF THE REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

The powers of regional government have been expanding systematically since its introduction in 2002. This is especially the result of the wide-scale administrative reform. The regional self-government performed one of the key

roles in this decentralizing shift. Many powers have been transferred in several stages, predominantly until 2004. Within this process, the district and regional offices of the general state administration lost their powers and finally disappeared. The set of powers managed by the regional authorities quite large now and include such important fields as education, social services, regional transport, regional development, and regional culture. Many powers are now executed by the regional authorities in partnership or on a contractual base. Responsibility in these fields accompanied by various decisions has increased the perception of regional self-government. Restructuring, cancellation of facilities or conflicts with service providers strengthened the perception of their role among the public. A good case was the conflict between the companies providing public transport in regions and the regional authorities subsidizing them, leading to a strike threat (e.g. Ragáčová 2010). Road building and maintenance, secondary schools and social services facilities (like retirement homes) are important powers sensitively perceived by the population. An increase of the scope and active administration of powers can substantially influence the strengthening of the societal position of regional self-governmental in the long-term outlook.

In the field of education, the main task is the system of secondary schools, including the professional, vocational, and art schools. It also manages the related services, such as school canteens, practical training centres, student dorms, as well as the maintenance and construction of the related buildings. The regional self-government operates social-services houses, protected housing facilities, single-parent housing, shelters, homes for children, personal assistance centres, centres for the provision of child day care, and the related social benefits and financial decisions. Additional policy issues include decisions on the registration of entities providing social services, the register of social centres and facilities, supervision of social services, the co-ordination of all subjects in this field, not mentioning the formulation of their own social policy. The role of regional self-government in health services is actually minor. It is responsible for the establishment of polyclinics and regional hospitals. It issues permits for running the non-State health care (e.g. polyclinics, first aid, hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, dental services) and it runs the register of health care facilities. It acts in prevention programmes, co-ordinates activities in human pharmacy and controls public pharmacies. The set of powers in regional culture include regional theatres, libraries, museums, galleries and cultural centres.

Powers in transport include the construction and maintenance of the "regional" road networks. Other, more administrative tasks, include the co-ordination of railways in the region's territory and regulation of the national public transport (timetables, licences). It is responsible for contracts of operation in the public interest to protect the transport accessibility of the territory (access to schools, work). The regional planning and development policies are the most discussed and used powers. The regional authorities are obliged to elaborate regional physical plans, regional development planning documentation (especially programmes for the economic and social development of the region) and to co-ordinate development plan implementation. Their role in planning of the regional tourism development and co-ordinating the implementation of tourism-development plans is specific, as such it reflects the important role of

tourism in some regions.

THE FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

The financing of regional self-government is among the key characteristics indicating its increasing importance. Now it operates with a more stable and transparent system of financial regulation. Its full dependence on transfers from the State budget finished in 2004. Fiscal decentralization introduced a more autonomous financing system after 2005. Besides the basic increase of resources available, its position confirms the increasing share in total general government expenditure, as well the increasing share of the capital expenditures in total expenditures of the regional authorities. Certain limits in financial autonomy indicate the fact that, for example, in 2009, 71 per cent of income was tax and other transfers from the central State (EUR 837 mill.), and almost 11 per cent proceeds from their own vehicle tax income. It indicates the absence of a stronger income base of their own. Another issue is the very high level of the mandatory expenditures (obligatory expenditures based on legislation). They certainly exceed 90 per cent of total expenditures, and during the economic crisis years even more. The lack of free resources in fact limits the initiative and expansion of regional self-government activities. Under financial pressure, the regional authorities have extensively reorganized the services they provide, in many cases with the purpose of achieving higher cost efficiency (e.g. through the reduction of the secondary school network).

The principles of regional self-government finances follow the general principle of public finances and the specific rules explicitly focusing on their funding (Act 583/2007 Coll.). The main financial documents are the budget and the final accounts. Both must be available to citizens at least 15 days before approval. All financial issues must be approved by the regional council – the budget, final account, as well as loans. The budget of the regional authority is formed on a multi-annual base, but only the budget for the forthcoming year is binding. Its internal structure includes revenues and expenditures within the current budget, the capital budget, and financial operations. Besides basic rules, the regional authority must respect the specific limits set by the legislation. The most important limits are: loans can only be used for capital purposes, they can take a guarantee only for subjects they have established (e.g. own public companies), the total debt stock cannot exceed 60 per cent of the current budget of the previous year, and the annual debt payments may not exceed 25 per cent of the current budget of the previous year. Financial relations between the State and the regional authority are included on an annual basis in the State budget. The State covers the expenditure of the delegated powers to the extent defined in legislation.

The funding of regional government has been influenced by its initial period of functioning. The regional authorities depended on the direct transfer of resources from the state budget for almost the complete first electoral period of their existence. They had only a very narrow opportunity to set their own spending priorities and were without any assigned tax income of their own. The situation has changed since 2005 when the fiscal decentralization came into practice. It defines the basic tax incomes of a regional authority – its own share of personal income tax yield (23.5 per cent) and the yield from its own vehicle tax, as

the only purely regional tax. The shared tax is distributed among regions according to the equalization formula respecting the main regional self-government powers and the weight of each region in a particular competence. The main variables include population size, the size of a region, population density, the percentage of population older than 62 years, the percentage of a population aged 15 to 18 years, and the total length of roads maintained by the regional authority. The second group of resources is non-tax revenues, mostly from fees and property yields. The last group of income includes transfers (mostly from the state budget), as well as grants from other resources (EU funds). The role of loans is rapidly increasing over time.

The total revenues of regional self-government have been increasing every year, from more than EUR 650 mill. (2005) to EUR 1,197 mill. (2009). The regional authorities have two major sources of revenues at their disposal – income from the shared personal income tax (EUR 403 mill. in 2009) and current grants and transfers from the state budget and EU funds (EUR 422 mill. in 2009). The third important, although much smaller source, is the vehicle tax (EUR 126 mill. in 2009). These compose a substantial part of the EUR 1,179 mill. total revenues (2009). Fees and payments for services provided by the regional self-government (EUR 47.5 mill. in 2009) are also worthy of mention. This positive development also reflects the positive pre-crisis economic development of the country.

The share of regional self-government expenditure of total general government expenditures has increased from 7 per cent in 2004 to 8.4 per cent in 2009. According to the functional classification, almost half of total expenditures are spent in education (45 per cent in 2009). A substantial part of these expenditures is covered from the transfer from the state budget. Teachers' and staff salaries compose a significant share of these expenditures. One fifth of total expenditures goes towards transport (20.3 per cent in 2009) – subsidy of transport companies to compensate for losses in regular public transport provided within the framework of the public interest, and to the maintenance of roads networks that the regions are responsible for. The third most important function financed by the regional self-government is social protection (17.6 per cent in 2009). These resources are used for the operation of various social facilities, including the salaries of employees and provided social services. One tenth of total expenditure is spent in the operation of regional self-government offices, their chairpersons, and councillors. The last important items among expenditure are recreation, culture, and religion. However, the main flow addresses the costs of cultural facilities administered by the regional authorities (museums, galleries, theatres, and other cultural institutions). It should also be mentioned that about a third of all expenditure make up for personnel cost (salaries and insurance payments).

The major parts of capital expenditure are new investments in construction activities. During the first years, a large proportion was addressed by the completion of administrative buildings, equipment and facilities (including information and telecommunication technologies, cars) for the self-governing regions. Standard important areas of capital expenditure are regional roads, schools and health facilities under their administration. Capital expenditure had a growing trend between 2005 and 2009 (from about EUR 70 mill. in 2005 to

EUR 196 mill. in 2008, or EUR 159 mill. in 2009). On average, 50-60 per cent of capital expenditure is spent on construction activities. The regional authorities also substantially increased their expenditure on land and building purchases. Modernization investments focusing on a better operation of activities (new equipment) are also important. The funding of investments has shifted from the sale of properties (mostly due to the reorganization of particular activities) towards loans.

The increased activity and fiscal autonomy of the regional authorities documents the further use of borrowing. During the initial stage of their operation, they had to follow rules focusing on the state resources they had administered mostly until 2004. It was also very visible in the minor scope of debt. The share of this level of government in total public debt is marginal, although it is growing (0.5 per cent in 2005, 1.64 per cent in 2009). After initial credit expansion in 2005 (about EUR 70 mill. of the new SKK credits), the next stage of expansion can be observed from 2007 to 2009. To the end of 2009, the total debt of regional self-government in Slovakia was EUR 380.8 mill. (at the same time, the total depth of local self-government exceeded EUR 1,170 mil.). The increase of loans appeared due to the investment credits taken by some regions, especially for larger-scale reconstructions of roads and transferred property (education and social sector facilities) that they administer and maintain. Such credit expansion and related debt payments caused difficulties to some regional authorities, after a steep decrease of tax incomes during public finance crisis in 2010.

SELECTED FEATURES OF REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT EUROPEANIZATION IN SLOVAKIA

There is no doubt that the acceleration of the introduction of regional self-government in Slovakia strongly influenced the general goal to integrate into the EU. It is logical that besides the strong ambition to participate and influence national policy-making, the Slovak regional authorities have been aware of the important role of the EU supra-national level of government for their success. They have developed independent activities with the aim of integrating better into the European political scene. They concentrate on three main areas – efficient representation in Brussels, building partnerships and cooperation with other regions, and the improvement of their position toward managing the EU funds. It has to be mentioned that a specific regulation concerns the international cooperation of regional self-government in Slovakia. All international agreements on cooperation need the approval of regional councils. Such agreements cannot be contrary to the Constitution and legislation. In the case of doubt, such aspects can be decided by the courts.

Activities of the regional authorities in Brussels – the House of Slovak Regions

The ambitions of regions and their activities turned quickly toward Brussels, which has been considered a very important concentration of decision-making relevant for their functioning. Representatives of regions started to participate at the EU institutions including the Committee of the Regions. The Slovak delegation includes Chairpersons of selected regions, as well as mayors of regional

centres' self-governments. However, the symptomatic feature of the Europeanization of the Slovak regions' policy is the decision to have direct representation in Brussels, respecting the experience of many other European regions, including for example those in Poland and the Czech Republic (e.g. Scherpereel 2007). Offices of sub-national governments, despite not possessing the formal powers, play an important role for their regions. According to Marks et al. (2002), the prime role of such offices is gathering of information (e.g. EU legislation under preparation), networking (especially building useful links with other regions), mediating between the home regions and the EU (transfers of information and opinions to and from Brussels), and influencing of policy-making processes (e.g. in the form of lobbying).

The first region with a permanent representation in Brussels was that of Bratislava (2002), later followed by the Prešov and Košice regions (2003). Since 2005, a joint representative office of Slovak regions – the House of Slovak Regions – has worked in Brussels. The Slovak regions, respecting their possibilities, selected the less costly form of a joint office. One or two delegates work on behalf of each region under the joint-mission co-ordination. Slovak regions have used this delegation to improve information flows, to intervene in the fields of their interests, and to multiply the efficiency of their own activities linked to the EU. The most important issue is to act effectively in improving the planning, programming, and implementation processes, and the access to EU funds. They highly esteem the prompt access to information, chances to lobby on certain issues, to have more opportunities in the search for partners, and to have a good contact place for co-operation with partners in Brussels. It improves the efficiency of work of the whole regional authority, better selection of priorities, the timing of activities, and it allows them to be more powerful partners to central and local government in Slovakia. One of the regional offices' outcomes had been a regular monthly newsletter ("Inflow from Brussels" 2006-2008), informing about the current developments relevant for regions. The House of Slovak Regions also serves as a back office for other staff of the regional authorities during their stays in Brussels.

Cross-border and inter-regional co-operation

The absence of regional self-government was considered as an important barrier to cross-border cooperation for years (e.g. Buček 2002). Despite the existence of the regional offices of the state administration from 1996, they had very limited powers to participate actively and efficiently in cross-border cooperation. The factors limiting the expansion of cross-border co-operation also included the absence of relevant legislation, as well as bilateral agreements between Slovakia and the neighbouring countries. All these limits had disappeared by the beginning of the decade and a new period of cross-border cooperation started. The Phare CBC and Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes played an important role that provided extensive support for expansion of cross-border cooperation, especially with Austria, as an older EU member state. A much larger scope of cross-border co-operation started after joining the EU. Since all the Slovak regions are in fact border regions, activity in this field is one of their priorities. Cross-border cooperation is often strongly identified with

the Euro-regions, as a practical expression and a tool of cross-border cooperation. Surprisingly, this is not the main arena of cross-border relations of the regional authorities in Slovakia. They concentrate on cooperation with the regional governments in neighbouring regions, and the working out and complementation of cross-border projects supported by EU funds.

Euro-regions started to function during the early 1990s in Slovakia (e.g. the Carpathian Euro-region). Their functioning was limited due to the absence of the relevant legislation that was completed only in 1999 with the adoption of the regulation for such associations and related activities (Halás 2005). It allowed substantial progress in the improvement of cross-border activities, including their establishment as legal entities; further formation of the joint institutions, elaboration of joint documents, and so on. At present, there are 10 registered euro-regions functioning in the Slovak borderland (Ministry of Interior 2010). Rare are Euro-regions with a leading role in self-governmental regions (this is the case of the mentioned Carpathian Euro-region with an important role of the Prešov and Košice self-governing regions). Most Euro-regions are smaller and the main actors are local authorities, or associations of local authorities (e.g. Euro-regions of Tatry and Beskydy). It means that in Slovakia, Euro-regions do not make up for a tool of cross-border cooperation between the neighbouring self-governmental regions. It does not mean that there are no links among them. All the regional authorities have already developed extensive agreements based on bilateral co-operation with the regional governments in other countries. It includes all neighbouring regions, as well as the regional governments of more distant regions, predominantly in the EU. For example, the Prešov self-governing region co-operates with nine regions from seven states (including two regions from neighbouring Ukraine and Poland), and the Trenčín region co-operates with six regions. Most regions declare a much wider informal co-operation with other regions as well. Regional authorities are among the key actors in implementation of activities funded from EU funds supporting cross-border cooperation.

Regional authorities have also started to build proper international inter-regional bilateral cooperation on formal (signed agreements) as well as informal levels. Usually, regions have signed agreements with all neighbouring regions, regions from all neighbouring states, and with a set of other regions, mostly from Europe. For example, the Prešov region declares cooperation with nine regions, seven of which are based on bilateral agreements. Its cooperation also covers regions outside the EU (in Ukraine, Russia and Norway). The Bratislava region is probably the most active one, which reflects its capital city position. Besides the concentration on neighbouring regions and regions in neighbouring States, it has also signed an agreement with the city region of Shanghai in China. Summarizing the cooperation of the Slovak regional authorities, the most frequent partners from regions outside the EU are those from Ukraine, Russia, Croatia and Norway. From regions within the EU (outside the neighbouring States), cooperation with regions from Italy and France is the most frequent. Regional authorities began to participate actively in the association of regions on the European level, as well as with the V4 countries (Forums of Regions). The Slovak regional authorities participate in additional European networks of regions such as the Lisbon Regions (Bratislava region) or the AER – Assembly of European Regions (four regions).

Regional self-government and the Structural Funds

The economic and social development of regions is one of the regional authorities' crucial tasks. Besides various sector powers, those in the development planning (territorial and regional), parts of the institutional framework for development, exploiting their own fiscal possibilities, are important actors in regional development by means of the EU Structural Funds. The question is - to what extent are they powerful actors in the use of Structural Funds for regional development (influencing the regional aspects of sector programmes and regional operation programs as such). Are they involved in the basic stages of their implementation – programming, implementation, project submission, and programme spending? We can only observe a partially increasing role of the Slovak regional authorities in this field.

One of the key issues for regional self-government is participation in the EU Structural Funds programming. It provides the opportunity to influence the objectives of fund spending, according to the priorities and fields they consider crucial. The Slovak regional authorities were eliminated from the preparation of the programming documents for the period 2004-2006, although there was a certain level of regional participation thanks to the regional state administration. According to Bachtler and McMaster (2008), the new regional authorities in this period lacked the technical capacity, human resources, and experience to offer high-quality input into the planning stage. During the first years of functioning, they also had only a marginal role in implementation of particular projects. A decisive role in implementation was held by the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development (MCRD). The regions were represented in the monitoring committees. The regional authorities and their organizations were more successful as beneficiaries.

The regional authorities were aware of their role and wanted to be much more involved in shaping the orientation of the Structural Funds, and in the management of their own operation programmes for the 2007-2013 planning period. The regional chairpersons developed large initiatives on all levels and they even prepared their own proposals for implementation procedures. Nevertheless, such a shift at that time was not adopted by the central government. The regions were assessed as not prepared, but the transition to the full responsibility of regional self-government was mentioned as a future intention (Valentovič 2006). Such elimination was a matter of an extensive debate, including wide media attention (e.g. Halán 2007). They asked for a much larger involvement in planning, as well as implementation of the Regional Operation Programme (ROP). The situation changed during the autumn of 2007. The central level (MCRD) finally recognized the potential role of regions in the implementation of the ROP. They also obtained resources for technical assistance. According to the ROP for 2007-2013, the system of implementation of the ROP suggests a gradual refraining from the centralized approach and establishes intermediate bodies under the Managing Authority on the level of NUTS 3 regions (regional self-governments). In Slovak conditions, decentralization at such a scale can be perceived as an innovative approach (Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, 2007). As a result, intermediary bodies under the ROP Managing Authority exist in each office of the self-governing region. They have an impor-

tant role in the implementation of measures in the development of tourism, regeneration of settlements, and regional road network. However, as Tvrdoň and Kmecová (2007) mentioned, it does not replace the final responsibility of the Managing Authority for implementation of the ROP. The regional authoprities are also eligible beneficiaries, each of them has a representative (with the exception of the Bratislava region) in the Monitoring Committee (more details are available at the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, 2007). They are members of other monitoring committees, with a stronger position, for example, compared to local level representatives (e.g. Operation Programmes Health, OP Knowledge Economy). Nevertheless, their position in the Monitoring Committee is less influential compared to the prevailing number of central state representatives. The weakness of the Slovak regional authorities is documented by the existence of only one ROP, compared, for example, to multiple ROPs in Poland according to their Voivodeships, or seven ROPs formulated in the Czech Republic (although combining more self-governmental regions). Despite the joint working out of development documents on the NUTS II level for 2007-2013, more extensive, permanent and efficient co-operation of regional authorities in regional development within the NUTS II spatial dimension is desirable (Fig. 1 presents the relationship between administrative divisions on the regional level and the NUTS II regional delimitation in Slovakia).

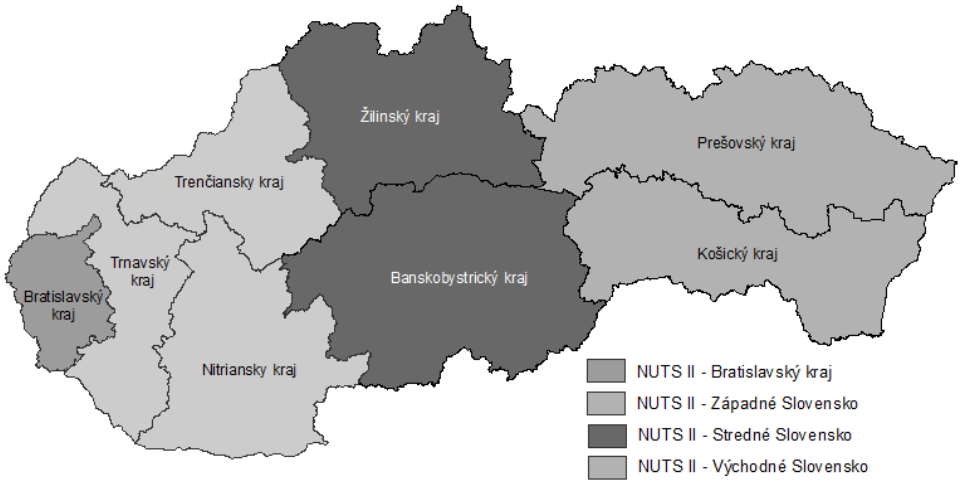

Fig. 1. Territorial administrative division at the regional level and NUTS II regions in Slovakia

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of regional self-government is one of the most substantial outcomes of the post-communist reforms and an important social innovation in Slovakia. It is also a successful project of the civil society towards the central state (see e.g. Brusis 2005). Nevertheless, the introduction of regional self-government was a top-down process with the strong influence of the political

parties that dominate the central state. After one decade of functioning, the regional authorities are taking matters into their own hands. The first, "sleepy" years of dependency on the central state, less initiative, less transparency and concentration of efforts on their own initial formation (offices, building of power execution capacities) are over. It already achieved a higher stage in the building of an important level of government, being able to compete with the central and local state. Its constitutional, legal, institutional, and financial basis underwent positive developments during the decade in favour of its strengthening. It is also better integrated into the EU related policies and successfully applies a set of important powers. Nevertheless, the position of the regional self-government is limited by other issues, such as the artificial regional divisions, still disputable legitimacy resulting from the low electoral attendance, lack of resources, or even unclear terminology (difference among the colloquial and official name of chairpersons) and so on. The main limit, though is perhaps the absence of sufficient powers and resources (including the EU funds) for managing regional development. Nevertheless, some regions have developed interesting activities even in this field, as in initiating the so-called cluster initiatives (e.g. the automotive cluster in the Trnava region and the Liptov tourism cluster in the Žilina region).

Regional self-government is still an ongoing project in Slovakia. A longer period is needed to achieve the full scale of autonomous functioning with a respected position. Further strengthening may be motivated by the deep social and economic diversity between regions and the need for a more endogenous, bottom-up approach to the development. However, it needs a stronger intra regional identity and cohesion. Communication with citizens, partly impaired by the lack of strong regional media is a different issue. Nevertheless, as the cooperation with many partners in the regions is expanding, a wider acceptance of this level of government can also penetrate into the public domain. At least regional chairpersons are now much more publicly known persons, compared to a few years ago (Klimovský 2009 for example confirmed a slightly improved perception). It seems that the building of an appropriate position for regional self-government is not a question of one decade, but rather of two or three decades. It will probably go together with the development of the applied regional governance concept.

Slovak regional self-government is demonstrating its own way of development, reflecting the prevailing opinion on the limited scope of the European "conditionality". It is not easily comparable even to other countries in CEE with a standard regional level of government (i.e. Poland, Czechia and Hungary). It is specific in such aspects as the direct election of the regional chairpersons, but it has a set of important powers, it has less competitors thanks to the cancelled regional and district offices of the general state administration, and the existing pressure to reduce other specialized offices of the state administration on the regional level. The level of the regional authorities proves their autonomy in organizational affairs, vice-chairpersons numbers, their own K8 association, and the regional development agencies. It also has a minor role in regional development compared to the Czech and Polish regional governments. Regional development was considered the key role of the new Ministry of Construction and Regional Development (since December 1999) established a bit earlier com-

pared to the self-governing regions. It had an ambition to protect its powers in the regional development compared to the regional governments. Cancellation of this ministry and dispersion of its powers to other ministries in 2010 also provides the opportunity for regional self-government to strengthen its role in this field.

The regional government level in Slovakia will probably never be as strong and autonomous as in Germany, Austria or Spain. On the other hand, there are signs of the formation of a stronger intermediate level comparable to the longer term "projects" of regional government in Italian or French regions. Whether a sort of intermediate Central European form of regional (self)government emerges in the Visegrad Four countries, or at least in Slovakia is a matter of future developments.

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List of political parties, their abbreviations and positions

SDKÚ – Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (2002-2006 – parliamentary and in government, 2006-2010 – in opposition, since 2010 in government, party leader in 2010 M. Dzurinda, party of Prime Minister I. Radičová since 2010)

SMER/SD – Smer – Social Democracy – (2002-2006 – parliamentary and in opposition; 2006-2010 parliamentary and in government, since 2010 parliamentary and in opposition, leader in 2010 R. Fico)

KDH – Christian Democratic Movement (2002- 2006 parliamentary and in government, 2006-2010 parliamentary and in opposition, since 2010 parliamentary and in government, leader in 2010 J. Figeľ)

SMK–MKP – Hungarian Coalition Party (2002-2006 – parliamentary and in government, 2006-2010 parliamentary and in opposition, since 2010 – non-parliamentary, leader in 2010 P. Csáky)

HZDS – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (2002-2006 – parliamentary and in opposition, 2006-2010 parliamentary and in government, since 2010 – non-parliamentary, leader in 2010 V. Mečiar)

SNS – Slovak National Party (1998-2002 parliamentary and in opposition, 2006-2010 parliamentary and in government, since 2010 parliamentary and in opposition, leader in 2010 J. Slota)

HZD – Movement for Democracy (non-parliamentary, always in opposition, smaller party established originally by Slovak President I. Gašparovič)

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Ján B u č e k

PRVÉ DESAŤROČIE BUDOVANIA REGIONÁLNEJ SAMOSPRÁVY NA SLOVENSKU

Jednou z významných čŕt postsocialistickej transformácie sa stala aplikácia duálneho modelu verejnej správy na Slovensku, s oddelenými líniami štátnej správy a samosprávy. Jej súčasťou malo byť aj opätovné zavedenie regionálnej úrovne verejnej správy. Tá sa však objavila v podobe regionálnej štátnej správy až v roku 1996. Založené boli krajské úrady, na ktoré boli prenesené vybrané kompetencie. Dlhé prípravy a diskusie nakoniec vyústili aj do vzniku regionálnej samosprávy od roku 2002, po predtým uskutočnených regionálnych voľbách. Takmer desať rokov existencie poskytuje dostatočný časový rámec na zhodnotenie ich postavenia, dosiahnutých úspechov, ale aj obmedzení.

Prvé obdobie fungovania regionálnej samosprávy môžeme charakterizovať ako „počiatočné a prechodné“, počas ktorého sa novovzniknuté orgány sústredili na riešenie praktických otázok svojho fungovania (úrady, budovy a pod.), vyrovnávali sa kompetenciami, ktoré získali, pričom boli až do roku 2004 obmedzené absenciou akejkoľvek výraznejšej fiškálnej autonómie. Druhé obdobie „dozrievania“ (od roku 2006) sa už sústredilo na budovanie regionálnej samosprávy ako rešpektovanejšej a efektívnejšej úrovne vlády. Posilňovali svoje výkonné štruktúry, upresňovali modely riadenia svojich kompetencií, využívali nové možnosti financovania. Ich pozíciu

posilnilo aj odstránenie hlavných inštitucionálnych konkurentov – okresných a krajských úradov. Na „strednej“ úrovni priestorovej politickej organizácie, medzi obcami a štátom, sa tak stala regionálna samospráva dominujúcim prvkom.

Príspevok predstavuje vývoj ústavného a legislatívneho rámca, ktorý umožnil garanciu pevného postavenia regionálnej samosprávy. Zmeny ústavy na jednej strane posilnili postavenie regionálnej samosprávy, na druhej strane umožnili Najvyššiemu kontrolnému úradu skúmanie jej fungovania v plnom rozsahu jej činnosti. Rastúce postavenie dokumentuje inštitucionálny vývoj regionálnej samosprávy. Vznikli pomerne veľké úrady samosprávnych krajov, iniciovali rôzne organizačné inovácie na báze partnerstva. Významným prvkom presadzovania samosprávnych krajov je pôsobenie Združenia predsedov samosprávnych krajov – K8, ktoré sa stalo partnerom centrálnej vlády pri prejednávaní otázok ich pôsobenia. Celkové postavenie a percepciu však stále negatívne ovplyvňuje problém legitimity, reflektujúci nízku účasť v regionálnych voľbách, ako aj ťažšie čitateľné správanie sa politických strán na regionálnej úrovni v podobe neštandardných koalícií. Novým prvkom, ktorý môže sťažiť ich fungovanie, je nárast podielu nezávislých kandidátov medzi zvolenými poslancami v roku 2009. Pozitívnou črtou posilňujúcou imidž krajskej samosprávy je záujem členov parlamentu, starostov a primátorov o pôsobenie v zastupiteľstvách samosprávnych krajov. Postavenie a intenzitu vnímania regionálnych samospráv vo verejnosti posilnilo aj aktívne spravovanie významných kompetencií, napr. v strednom školstve, sociálnej starostlivosti či doprave. Vo sfére financovania patrí k pozitívam najmä nárast disponibilných zdrojov, rast podielu na celkových verejných výdajoch v štáte či rastúci podiel kapitálových výdavkov. Naopak, stále zostáva významným limitom závislosť na transferoch z centrálneho štátu a veľmi vysoký podiel mandatorných výdavkov.

Značne rozsiahle sú aktivity regionálnych samospráv v ich integrácii do procesov európskej politiky. Dobre to dokumentuje pôsobenie Domu slovenských regiónov v Bruseli či cezhraničná spolupráca s inými regiónmi, najmä v rámci EÚ. Za jednu zo svojich najvýznamnejších úloh však regionálne samosprávy považujú aktivity v oblasti regionálneho rozvoja a znižovania medziregionálnych disparít. Práve v tejto oblasti však vývoj postupuje pomalšie. Kritickým momentom je ich stále obmedzený podiel pri implementácii fondov EÚ. Na úrovni úradov samosprávnych krajov pôsobia len sprostredkovateľské orgány regionálneho operačného programu, resp. sú členmi monitorovacích výborov ďalších operačných programov. Ich pozícia je slabšia ako napr. inštitúcií regionálnej úrovne vlády v Česku alebo Poľsku.

Celkový vývoj potvrdzuje trend zlepšujúceho sa postavenia regionálnej samosprávy na Slovensku, schopnej presadzovať sa aj voči miestnej samospráve či centrálnej vláde. Pomalý postup však súčasne naznačuje, že vybudovanie silnej a efektívnej regionálnej samosprávy, rešpektovanej v politickom systéme krajiny a jasne vnímanej obyvateľmi je úlohou nie jednej, ale viacerých dekád. Hoci naše regionálne samosprávy asi nikdy nedosiahnu pozíciu regionálnych vlád v Rakúsku alebo Španielsku, predsa len môžu byť v dlhodobejšej perspektíve významnejším aktérom, ako napr. regionálne vlády v Taliansku alebo Francúzsku.