

Formation of politico-administrative relations on local level in Slovakia

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In this paper, I would like to present some of the current features of the formation of the politico-administrative relations at the local level in Slovakia. First of all, I want to characterise the basic institutional components of the public administration system at the local level and connect relations between locally elected politicians and local senior officials. Further, I want to speak about the self-perception of senior officials in the city councils in Slovakia, especially how they see their role in relation to local politicians.

Everyone agrees that the change towards a modern professional public service cannot be a quick process, because the change of orientations and behaviour is much more complicated than the change of structures. Therefore, the question of what local officials (bureaucrats) are expected to be, in their own eyes, and the way they perceive politicians at the local level is very important to understand. Such research can be very useful for understanding the problems in the interaction between officials and politicians in post-communist countries.

Institutional framework of politico-administrative relations

1/ Diversification of local system

In Slovakia the regional level of self-government with its own competencies, which would represent local interests and regional programmes, was established in July, 2001. (Act on Regional Self-government Units) Since this time, the regionalisation is going to be recognised as movement from administrative regionalisation to political regionalisation. In September 2001, The National Council of the Slovak Republic approved the Act on Transfer of some of the Competencies from the National State Administration to the Municipalities and Regional Self-Governmental Units, with more than 300 competencies that should be moved from the state administration to the municipal and regional self-governments during the next two years. In October 2001, additional legislation was adopted by the National Council of the SR (Municipal Establishment), which initiated the provisions regarding the independent activities of municipalities and the process of transferring competencies from the national state administration to the municipalities. Most importantly, these included financial and

economic matters, which should lead to a diversified system. The decentralisation of power from the state to the regional level and the strengthening of the competencies of municipal self-governments would strengthen the interests of political parties to enhance their specific regional policies, and ultimately it might help to revitalise regional socio-economical development and create a regional regulation system.

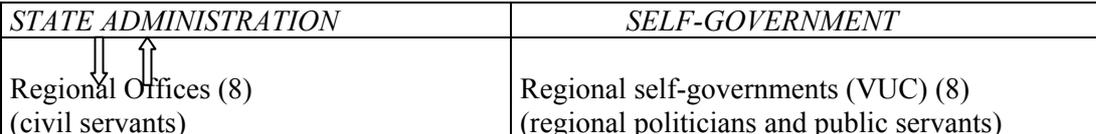
However, we can recognise that the actions at the central level - e.g. personnel changes in the cabinet, cases of corruption in the central government, quarrels in the governing coalition etc. – also has significant influence upon the actions at the regional and municipal self-government level, and the relations between local politicians and officials.

The lack of horizontal and vertical co-ordination of actions of local (regional and municipal) politicians and officials of the administrative bodies is a great problem. Little has been done to develop the new mechanisms for integration, co-ordination and control of the local governments.

2/ Central- local relations

Basically, the Slovak local public administration system is based on two components,

- regional and municipal self-government ,
- regional and district state administration.

<i>STATE ADMINISTRATION</i>	<i>SELF-GOVERNMENT</i>
 Regional Offices (8) (civil servants)	Regional self-governments (VUC) (8) (regional politicians and public servants)
District Offices (79) (civil servants)	Municipal self-governments (2871) municipal politicians and public servants

The State Administration side is hierarchical and, therefore the Regional and District offices are interrelated. The Self Government side is not hierarchical, the Regional and Municipal Self Governments are independent, and need to co-operate on special agendas. By the legal regulation, there is a relatively high degree of independence of the representative bodies (local politicians) from the central power in the decision-making process. On the one hand, it produces a quite integrated local political elite (elected), producing policies having common community values. On the other hand, practice

shows that it produces at the same time a lack of true governance. The control system of administration in self-government is not working satisfactorily or effectively. It is within the competence of state administration to oversee the work of self-governmental bodies only in certain areas where the latter carry out tasks delegated by the state. The budget of the regions and municipalities, which have their own revenues, can be checked only by an auditor. But the auditor is appointed by the mayor with the approval of the council, which may lead them to favour certain political parties in performing their work. The self-governmental bodies also decide the auditors' remuneration. However, filling this position is rather problematic, especially in small municipalities where few people have the requisite qualifications and skills.

3/ Local Self-government administration

The self-governmental branch of local governments (regional and municipal) have their own administrative bodies, *the regional office, the magistrates office and the municipal office*. These offices carry out the tasks connected with the functioning of self-government, with the preparation of administrative matters which are decided by the councils. Their role is to carry out the self-government's tasks delegated by law. The office is led by the *head of the administrative office*, who is nominated by the representative body (council) and then accepted by the mayor. Magistrates and municipal offices have a dual accountability: a) to the municipal council of self-government (municipal representatives) b) to the district office (civil servants of state administration).

The pattern of local administrative behaviour corresponds closely to G. Peters "village life model",¹ which assumes a high degree of integration of values and goals of both politicians (representatives) and officials (public servants). Loyalty to the politicians is the unwritten rule. The career path of officials is practically dependent on elected politicians, mainly mayors. The decision to promote public servants to higher posts is the responsibility of the head of the office who is accountable to the mayor and municipal council. Such decisions are in practice often based on professional and political agreements too.

¹ Malikova, L., Staronova, K., Politico-administrative relations: the case of Slovakia, In: T. Verheijen (2001), Politico-administrative relations. Who rules?. NISPAcee, Bratislava. pp. 268-293.

4/ Politicians and officials at local level

We can recognise some special characteristics in relations among locally elected politicians and officials in Slovakia:

1/ The mayor is elected directly by citizens and his role is to represent the local government in the relationship towards state authorities and other legal persons. He has a crucial influence on the structure of relations between elected politicians and officials (public servants). The mayor is, at the same time, an executive authority in the municipality. He directs the municipal council and is responsible for carrying out its own local competencies as well as the state competencies which have been transferred to the local level. From a juridical point of view, his activities become part of state administration and implementation of legislation.

In the Slovak case, the thesis stressing the continuity of power at the municipal level is confirmed very clearly in municipal elections. Comparing results between the local elections there is a strong incumbency factor at work. This fact suggests that a high level of self-confidence, repeat nominations by the political subjects, and the opinion of the electorate may help explain the small turnover of personnel.

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 management networks among interest groups of businessmen, bankers, entrepreneurs, various civic organisations and political parties, and this influences the decision-making process at the local level.

2/ Mayors are in daily contact with administrative officers. The composition of the offices is not based on individual rules or methods. In practice, they depend on how the municipal councils structure their work and what responsibilities they entrust to their employees within the administrative office of the council. What this means in practice is that the mayors together with the councils proceed on the basis of their own experiences, interests, intuition and frequently improvisation. The career path of municipal officials is fully dependent on elected politicians, mainly mayors, councillors or a nominated head of office (senior officer).

Old patterns of behaviour to the formal authority is very frequent and the local official is prepared to serve ruling politicians in the municipality. The small municipalities in rural areas have permanent problems getting qualified officials and when they have such individuals they usually operate with a high level of administrative discretion. This is

because of the daily contact with citizens through the special agendas. The officials are willing to use their responsibilities to pursue private interests. But discretion is also significant in bigger towns and cities where the magistrate's office is quite a large.

3/ The municipal council sets up *executive committees* that are either permanent or temporary, and can be advisory or initiative bodies of the municipal council. Executive committees consist of selected members of the municipal council as politicians, professional staff members, nominated by the body and other group inhabitants of the municipality. A municipal council determines the composition and the tasks of the committees. The members of the committee have undoubtedly better operational ability and they use the professional skills of different officers in many cases of local policy.

4/ The professional administrative matters of self-government are mostly supplied under the *head of office* (senior official) who is leading the local office and he is accountable to the mayor and municipal council. The head of the office (nominated leader) and mayor (elected leader) are both part of the unified municipal elite and practically they are not in conflict over power within the self-government structure itself (village life model). The mayors together with the head of office are mostly on the top in the game, since the shape of policies that municipal offices and its officers implement is dependent on them.

Self-perception of the role of the local senior officials

In December 2002 and January 2003 we collected an empirical material (14 semi-structured interviews) at the local self-governmental levels with the senior officials who work in self-government in the biggest cities in Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice, Banská Bystrica – over 100 000 inhab.) and medium towns (Ziar nad Hronom, Prievidza, Trenčín etc.). The set of interviews was created as a pilot research project. We observed how senior officials (heads of office) perceive their role and the new tasks in the office and how they perceive the role of politicians in self-government and relations to them. These are a some of preliminary the results of our interviews.

1/ Perception of relations between senior officials and politicians

Generally the senior officials perceive relations between public servants and politicians at the local level as fair and good. But at the same time they feel that they need better communication to fulfil the goals of policies of self-government. They think that worse

communication could be caused by the institutional and legal framework, which does not stimulate politicians to active co-operation with public servants and visa versa. The strong opinions of the heads of office in self-governments relate to the legal position given them by law. They responded that the state of the legal framework of their competencies and the definition of the role of the head of the executive body of self-government in the Municipal Act is unsatisfactory. They expect that the law will clearly define conditions in which the head of office should be appointed or removed.

2/ Self-perception of senior officials

They agree with the statement that they bring valuable experiences to their work but they do not agree (nor disagree) that disposing with good managerial skills will bring them success in the private sector. But these skills are crucial for modern public service. They do not feel that the skills of public servants are fully comparable with the best talents in the private sector. They see their work as an opportunity for making long-term improvements at the local level of administration. This indicates, from our point of view, their uncertainty in keeping their job after the arrival of new politicians in self-government. Public servants also feel that they play an important role in creating public programs (policy) in their city.

3/ Perception of local politicians

Senior officials are more sceptical about the statement that politicians bring valuable experiences to their work. Comparing this with the evaluation of the ability of leaders, they suppose that politicians are better prepared for leadership and they see their work as an opportunity for making long-term improvements at the local level. They doubt that their skills and professionalism are comparable with the best managers in the private sector. Most of them think that new local politicians come to the office only with a general thesis instead of concrete public programs and they are not well aware of the competencies and possibilities of public administration. So there is a high potential for rising tensions between the possibilities of administrators and the expectations of politicians. The senior officials agree with the statement that local assemblies often interfere in the work of public servants and disagree that the behaviour of offices is not affected too much by the new composition of local councils.

Conclusion

Politico-administrative relations are based on legally defined differences between permanent officials and politicians, but the resistance of traditional bureaucratic procedures at the local level is more deeply rooted than the political enthusiasm to develop a more effective administrative system. The behavior and thinking of officials is influenced by the administrative routines of the previous local governmental system.

In local decision-making, representative democracy has been the foundation of the new political system. Particularly in the Slovak context, the question arises of how to combine political decision-making by popularly elected representatives and the professional municipal administration staff. One of the important tasks for senior officials is to ensure that local policies (programs) adopted by the representative body (city council) are effectively implemented by administration. Therefore these officials expect good political management as well as leaders (mayors) who will work with them. They are willing to be loyal to politicians, but at the same time they expect clear rules for organisational behaviour. They also expect a better communication between politicians and officials to fulfil the goals of policies of self-government in towns and cities.

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