

INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION – A TOOL FOR SOLVING AND SATISFYING THE HETEROGENEOUS RESIDENTS NEEDS

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Abstract

Inter-municipal cooperation is an alternative form of cooperation that enables municipalities to jointly achieve goals and interests related to a wide range of selected problems of partner municipalities. It can be seen not only as a tool for solving pressing issues of the existence and functioning of municipalities and cities, but also as a tool for improving the quality of life and services of citizens belonging to the units that are implemented. The aim of this contribution is to point out the current situation in the field of general cooperation in the Slovak Republic, as well as the perspective of interested parties on this form of cooperation. The contribution is an output of the Interreg SK-CZ project (MOSINVI 2020-2021), while its processing was based on the analysis of a questionnaire survey, which was carried out with the help of respondents included in the categories of representatives of municipalities and cities. The answers of these respondents were the basis for the creation of conclusions and recommendations.

Key words

Common municipal office; Cooperation; Local action group; Micro-region; Municipality.

JEL Classification: H75, L38, O18

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Introduction

Cooperation between cities and municipalities is one of the basic tools of the municipality. It allows to solve issues related to the growth and development of territorial administrative units. Inter-municipal cooperation is a tool to ensure, realize and evaluate the area of self-government from an economic and social point of view. It represents a basic prerequisite for meeting the heterogeneous needs of the residents of mini-municipalities. Within the application of this tool, it is necessary to emphasize the principle of efficiency and effectiveness.

There are many forms and means to implement the cooperation. Communities have a choice of several variants, which are guaranteed by the State from a legislative, institutional and financial point of view. However, the common denominator is the municipalities themselves (representatives and members of the self-government), the health and character of the self-government (the size and integrity of the self-governments), the external and internal relations of the self-governments, and the competences that belong to these self-governments.

In the Slovak Republic, it is one of the most pressing problems of the self-government environment. When it comes to the question of the size and integrity of municipalities, i.e. the residential structure of the Slovak Republic, the high level of fragmentation of local government has been encountered for a long time. Since 1993, not only the professional public has been drawing attention to this problem, but especially the representatives of these municipalities themselves. This phenomenon then causes problems regarding the existence and functionality of the given units. The units cannot fully fulfill the tasks that belong to the municipalities from the financial and personnel point of view. An alternative solution is therefore the institute of inter-municipal cooperation. Inter-municipal cooperation, as a possibility for solving the heterogeneous needs of the population of municipalities and cities, especially purposeful satisfaction of residents needs and interested parties for which the municipalities provide services, eliminates this deficiency, but does not solve it. It should also be emphasized that cooperation between municipalities and cities is not only about solving acute and unpopular issues. The goal of cooperation and partnership is to achieve a

qualitatively-quantitatively higher level of material and non-material goods.

The present state and situation of the application of the institute of inter-municipal cooperation in the SR environment are discussed in the article, the aim of which is also to identify and evaluate the issue of inter-municipal cooperation. For this purpose, available official State statistics and data obtained through self-research (questionnaire survey) were used, which were processed using selected mathematical and statistical methods. Therefore, the accepted conclusions also relate to the possible scenario of the future development of cooperation in the conditions of the Slovak Republic

Literature overview

The historical development of settlements and the related fragmentation of the settlement structure of the Slovak Republic (Klobučník et al., 2018, Jakabová, Jenčo, 2012), the transformation of public administration after 1989 (Kováčová, 2015, Machyniak, 2013) or the transfer of competences from the State to local self-government, they are only a fraction of the facts that cause serious problems for municipalities (especially small municipalities) (ÚMS, 2020, ZMOS, 2017, NKÚ, 2013). These problems are most noticeable especially in the area of securing and exercising competences. In many cases, municipal services do not correspond to the qualitative aspect, scope and interpretations of the law (Žárska, 2018).

Pursuant to Act of the Slovak Republic no. 369/1990 Coll. on the municipal establishment, the basic task of the municipality is to take care of the all-round development of the territory and the needs of the inhabitants of the given unit. Under the conditions of the Slovak Republic, 2,927 municipalities, of which 1,868 are small municipalities, are to ensure this, i.e. municipalities in the category of up to 1,000 inhabitants (ŠÚ SR, 2022). It is typical for these small municipalities that they cannot adequately ensure the growth and development of the municipality, or to provide comprehensive services for its residents. The reason is, as stated by Paulenová (SME, 2020), that "most of the income will be used for the operation of the municipality, administration and wages, but not

for the services that the municipality should provide". In addition, some municipal revenues are tied to the number of inhabitants, which means that small municipalities therefore lack financial resources.

For this reason, municipalities use the possibility and opportunity represented by municipal cooperation, whether inter-municipal or cross-border. Cooperation between municipalities is carried out in the interest of better provision of public goods (material and immaterial) for the benefit of ensuring the needs of residents and further development of municipalities.

"Inter-municipal cooperation is a complex process that requires a common vision of development, appropriate structures and tools for integrated and systemic decision-making, adequate processes and management, a culture of governance, as well as leaders who are able to bring actors together and motivate them to a common effort ." (Valach et al., 2019)

According to Berenga et al. (2011, in Valach et al. 2019) inter-municipal cooperation is a general term for all jointly provided public services between municipalities that are usually, but not necessarily, neighbors.

Inter-municipal cooperation, according to Žárska (2018), means the fact that the municipality enters into such cooperation that is beneficial for the municipality and beneficial to its residents, so that it brings an increase in the quality of the provision of public services and increases the efficiency of handling financial resources.

As stated by Hasprová, Drábik and Žák (2012), small municipalities are naturally more inclined to cooperate than larger municipalities, which are able to independently provide a greater range of services. Inter-municipal cooperation is thus a classic compensation of the so-called „smallness“ of municipalities and also their inability to provide public services independently.

Bolgherini (2011, in Ježek et al., 2015) emphasizes that inter-municipal cooperation is characterized by an effort to provide better quality of public services, achieve their territorial and population optimization, reduce costs and

increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their provision.

The main motive of the local self-government to enter into cooperation is primarily to ensure the needs of the community and its prosperity, as well as the effort to jointly develop the territories. A prerequisite for successful cooperation in the territory is the creation of a stable core of institutions in the territory, the creation of a common vision and the direct involvement of top institutions with relevant decision-making powers (Galvasová et al., 2007).

In general, there are two basic approaches to inter-municipal cooperation, namely the top-down approach, which represents the cooperation between municipalities and cities managed by local governments (superiority of municipalities) and the bottom-up approach, which is characterized by the cooperation of municipalities on their own initiative (mainly due to the lack of financial resources).

Reasons for municipal cooperation according to Hasprova, Drábik and Žák (2012):

- problems of a homogeneous nature can be solved less expensively and without loss of autonomy,
- the resources needed to solve existing problems significantly exceed the professional and material capabilities of individual municipalities,
- the nature of the service provided (drinking water supply, wastewater treatment plant, etc.), the cultural, social or economic orientation of several municipalities demands for the need to articulate a common expression and common procedure,
- mutual communication and brainstorming support creative ideas, an atmosphere of solidarity and belonging, which undoubtedly forms a suitable basis for political and social stability in the respective area.

Based on the research that was carried out in this area, such as analysis of the micro-regions of the Slovak Republic based on centers of settlement, school attendance and employment, identified natural micro-regions in the Slovak Republic in 2005 and 2016 (Slavík et al., 2016). Based on the analysis of inter-municipal cooperation in the Nitra district and

identification of positive externalities to entities and residents in given territory (Valach et al., 2019) or surveys focused on the area of inter-municipal cooperation and cross-border cooperation (Bereščeká et al., 2020), it is possible to identify areas of municipal cooperation:

- advisory, consulting and methodical activities (legal, financial, technical, design, etc.),
- building technical infrastructure (water supply, sewerage, gas, roads),
- register and social care,
- local and regional culture, tourism and its information and promotion support,
- basic, specialized and retraining education,
- construction office, housing and housing construction,
- healthcare of first and second contact,
- territorial and regional planning, environmental protection,
- removal and disposal of municipal waste,
- fire protection,
- common business (common municipal business entities),
- mass suburban transport reaching the end villages,
- support of small and medium-sized businesses,
- security and fight against crime, property protection

Goal and Methodology

The aim of the submitted article is to examine, identify and evaluate the current state of inter-municipal cooperation in the Slovak Republic. The results of this issue are based on a study of the issue of cooperation between cities and municipalities within the Interreg project (carried out in 2020-2021, based on a sample of 239 respondents), which was part of the given study. When processing the results, available official State statistics and data obtained by own research (questionnaire survey) were used. These results were processed by selected mathematical and statistical methods, which were analyzed, compared, and based on synthesis and deduction, conclusions were drawn from them. A selection of the most interesting results and observations allows itself to be presented within this output.

Added value is also the conclusions adopted, which relate to the possible scenario of the future development of cooperation in the Slovak Republic, as well as the recommendations presented in the final part of this article. In addition, the article contains 2 tabular and 6 graphic illustrations.

Inter-municipal cooperation of municipalities in Slovakia

The cooperation of territorial administrative units is one of the options offered by the State as an answer to questions regarding the growth and development of municipalities. Thanks to partnership cooperation, there is understanding, inspiration, innovation, exchange of experience or sharing of problems that these units encounter (daily) in the execution of their competences.

With the gradual transfer of competences from the State administration to the local self-government, there was an increasing use of the inter-municipal cooperation institute in Slovakia (since 1989). Among the fundamental ones, we recommend the establishment of the Association of Cities and Towns of Slovakia, the creation of the first micro-regional associations or, later, local action groups and etc.

As stated by Slavík et al. (2016), the differentiation between associations according to the number of municipalities was large. The smallest regional associations consisted of around 10 municipalities, while the largest ones exceeded 100 municipalities. As a reaction to the decentralization of State competences to local governments, the first joint construction authorities began to emerge in 2002.

Gradually, new opportunities for inter-municipal cooperation were created and special-purpose associations were created, which were more specific, goal-oriented, many times connected with the creation of new joint entities (enterprises, agencies, centers), while their members were not only municipalities, but also other public administration institutions and private sector.

This cooperation covered a wide range of activities, from joint cultural and sports events to the elaboration of a joint sustainable development strategy. It also included a wide

range of actors, which were elected representatives, professional office employees, youth, pensioners, representatives of entities and associations operating in the territory of the municipality, etc. This cooperation was carried out on the basis of a contract for the purpose of carrying out a specific task, a contract on the establishment of an association of municipalities or a contract on the establishment of a common municipal office, which is dealt with by Act of the Slovak Republic No. 369/1990 Coll. on municipal establishment.

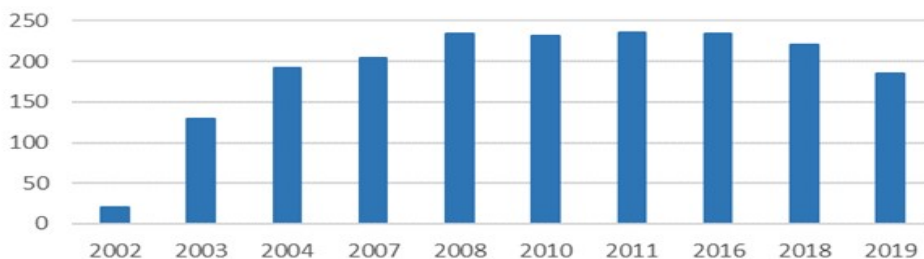
The latter variant of cooperation - Common municipal office (CMO), is currently a frequently discussed topic. In their works, Teja, Hamalová, Nižňanský, Slavík and others deal with it, despite the fact that it began to be used in connection with the first State-decentralized competences already in January 2002, when a total of 63 competences were transferred from the state administration to local self-government. It is therefore used to solve the execution of the decentralization of competences by the local government, while there is no loss of legal sovereignty, but optimization of the performance of given tasks (Hrtánek, 2018).

When deciding the creation of a common office, the choice of criteria is very important how the individual representatives of local governments decide the advantages of such inter-municipal cooperation (Slavík et al., 2016). For this reason and in compliance with this rule, cooperation mainly affects key areas such as social services, environment, education, healthcare, infrastructure, regional development, etc. The cooperation carried out through these offices is significant with more qualitative and more qualified execution of transferred competencies from the State administration to the self-administration. The enormous increase of these offices and the subsequent stabilization, which confirms the meaning and importance of this apparatus (Figure 1), occurred in the initial years of the competences transfer. It most significantly affected smaller municipalities, which, reflecting the need to ensure the functionality of the given services, joined such cooperation. Therefore, the transfer of competences from the State to the municipalities can be considered one of the main reasons for the application of the right of municipalities to associate through the Common municipal office

(CMO). However, CMOs not only arise, but also disappear. The demise of the offices is the result of an incorrect estimate of demands and insufficient needs reflection of clients (e.g. CMO Trenčín, Modra, Viničné) as well as the ability

of municipalities to ensure independent execution. In both cases, i.e. in the creation and dissolution of CMO, it is based on objective assessments and possibilities of the given partners.

Figure 1 Development of the number of Common municipal offices in the Slovak Republic



Source: MV SR (2021a)

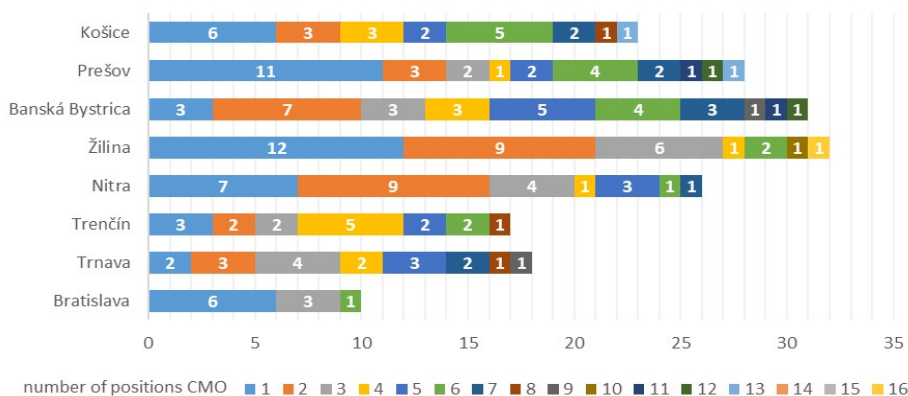
The trend in the development of the number of these offices has been decreasing since 2016. The decrease is primarily caused by the enormous workload of administrative employees, which leads to an increase time to prepare agendas, which is met with criticism and dissatisfaction.

The latest available data on the number of CMOs, i.e. for the year 2019, which is managed by the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, shows a decrease of 21% compared to the mentioned year. The CMO was canceled in

49 cases, and that means, the execution of transferred competences for over 4 million residents is provided by 186 CMO.

The most frequently resolved agenda that CMO carries out is the agenda of building regulations (149), nature protection (128) and local communications (112). It is interesting to note that in up to 71% of cases, there is multi-cooperation between municipalities, which cover two or more issues simultaneously within the sections and performed competences (Figure 2).

Figure 2 CMO according to the number of activities (status as of 31 December 2019)



Source: own processing according to the data of MV SR (2021a)

It is also not a rare case when, in order to satisfy the needs of their residents, municipalities have several contractual relationships, i.e. they solve the agenda through several CMOs under which they belong, e.g. construction and school office of Dunajov, Vavrečka and others. Likewise, it is not a rare case when municipalities take on the role not only of members of associated municipalities, but also in

the role of main guarantor, that is, associating municipality in the area of transferred competences, e.g. municipalities of Lendak, Tešedíkovo and others.

The largest number of municipalities involved in one CMO is reported by CMO Beniakovce (Košice region - 70 municipalities), the minimum of two municipalities falling under CMO is reported in 12 cases (Table 1).

Table 1 Size of CMO in SR

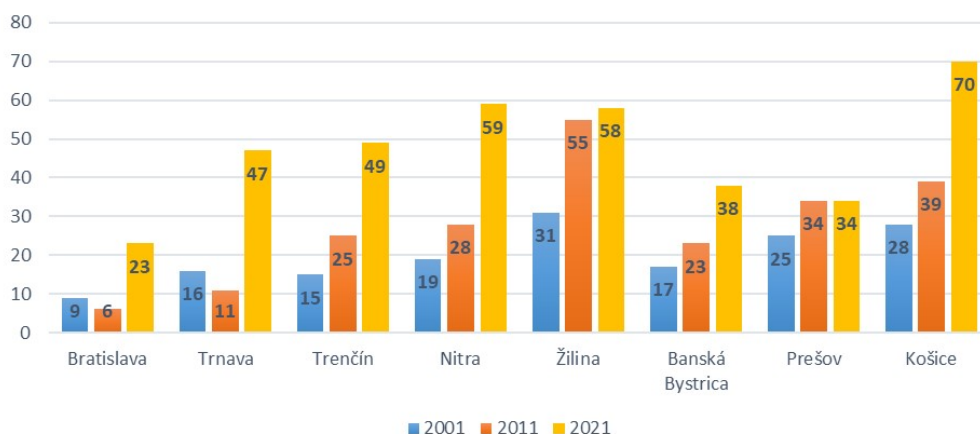
Region	Municipalities			Population			Number of CMO
	Total number in SR	Total number in CMO	min. max.	Total number	Total number in CMO	min. max.	
Bratislava	89	48	2 13	719 537	168 602	7 960 32 275	10
Trnava	251	199	2 42	566 008	425 887	5 094 67 441	18
Trenčín	276	208	2 35	577 464	405 405	2 028 65 092	17
Nitra	354	352	2 48	674 306	699 808	2 714 90 304	26
Žilina	315	335	2 39	691 613	601 791	2 822 81 301	32
Banská Bystrica	516	490	4 38	625 601	545 073	2 976 70 396	31
Prešov	665	687	2 62	808 931	744 625	1 416 146 005	29
Košice	461	407	3 70	782 216	491 307	2 629 61 831	23
Σ	2927	2726	2 70	5449270	4 082 498	1 416 146 005	186

Source: own processing according to the data of MV SR (2021a)

Another used variant of cooperation between municipalities and cities includes the institute of association of a micro-regional nature, i.e. microregional associations. Microregions as a "voluntary association of municipalities" that, within the framework of the area's catchment, the principles of cohesion and the fulfillment of common goals and changes" (Labounková,

Půček, Rohrerová, 2009) also underwent changes. These changes concern not only their number, but also their purpose and functionality. Since 2001, when their number was 160 (Slavík, 2016), up to 373 such apparatuses are currently recorded in this issue (MV SR, 2021b; Figure 3), which represents a 133% increase in the number of microregions.

Figure 3 Microregions of the Slovak Republic in 2001-2021



Source: own processing according to the data of Slavík a kol. (2016), Pustá (2011), MV SR (2021b)

However, many micro-regional associations do not show regular activity. The reason is the lack of funds and the lack of suitable subsidy demands that associations could use for the growth and development of the given micro-regions.

Local action groups (LAG) are the newest and also very popular form of association of municipalities. It is a form of cooperation, when municipalities, associations of municipalities, entrepreneurs, non-state non-profit organizations cooperate for the purpose of rural development, i.e. improvement of basic and citizen infrastructure, tourism and cultural activities, etc.

LAGs primarily address issues of the internal potential and development of the region in which

they operate. As stated by Dragoun (2014), at the decision-making level, the ratio of representatives of the private sector (private entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, citizens representing interest groups) must be at least half of the local partnership. The remaining, second half must be made up of representatives from the public sector. The above means that emphasis is placed on a balanced representation of partners from various socio-economic spheres representing the given territory.

The first public-private partnerships in the Slovak Republic were established in 2006. Three years later, as many as 29 of these partnerships received LAG status. Currently, this form of association is represented by 110 LAGs (Tab. 2).

Table 2 Local action groups of the Slovak Republic

Region	2007-2013	2014-2020
Bratislava	1	3
Trnava	4	12
Trenčín	4	11
Nitra	5	15
Žilina	2	10
Banská Bystrica	5	18
Prešov	4	24
Košice	4	17
Σ	29	110

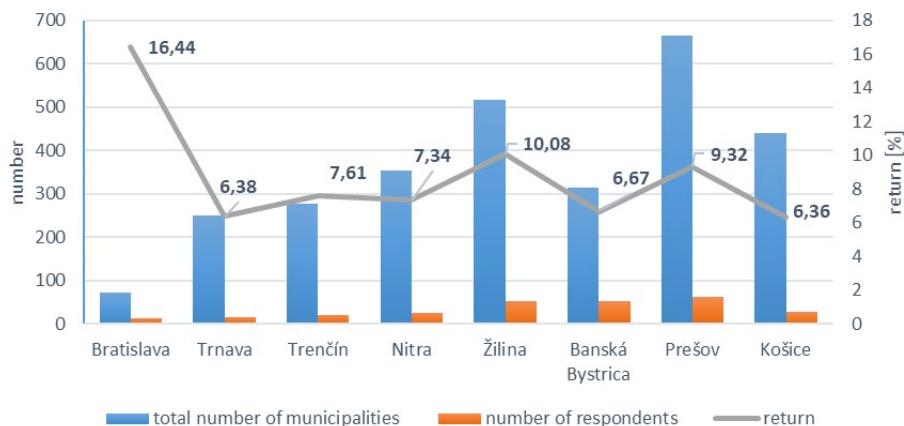
Source: own processing according to the data of Národná sieť rozvoja vidieka SR (2021)

LAGs are active in the area of stimulation of small and medium forms of business/crafts and development of civic infrastructure. A huge advantage of LAG is the support of their financing, which is characterized by support from the European Union. This financing is carried out through demands and resources of the EU - Integrated Regional Operational Program, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Rural Development Program of the SR 2014-2020 (a non-refundable financial contribution to finance the operational costs of LAG).

Results and findings resulting from the implemented questionnaire inquiry

The questionnaire survey was conducted in 2021, in electronic form. All 2390 representatives of the local self-government were addressed with the questionnaire. The achieved return was 10% (239 respondents, of which 223 municipalities and 13 cities - Figure 4). We attribute this result mainly to the problems and obligations that local governments had during the critical period of the pandemic crisis - COVID19. We analyzed the respondents' answers in detail and present the selection in this article.

Figure 4 Regional structure of survey respondents



Source: own questionnaire survey (2020-2021)

Most of the respondents involved in the questionnaire survey came from the Prešov region (26% of respondents), the Banská Bystrica region (22% of respondents) and the Košice region (12% of respondents). In this regard, we consider the direct proportionality of the respondents to the quantitative nature of the regions in terms of the representation of municipalities and cities to be positive. However, from the point of view of return answers, it was mainly the representatives of the municipalities and cities of the Bratislava Region who participated in this survey in the largest number (16.44% returns). The smallest return was recorded from the representatives of the municipalities of the Košice Region (6.36% returns).

Respondents had the opportunity to comment on several questions that we consider important, but it is not possible to present all of them. Therefore, we decided to select those that are a priori related to the main idea of the contribution, namely the current state and situation in the field of inter-municipal cooperation.

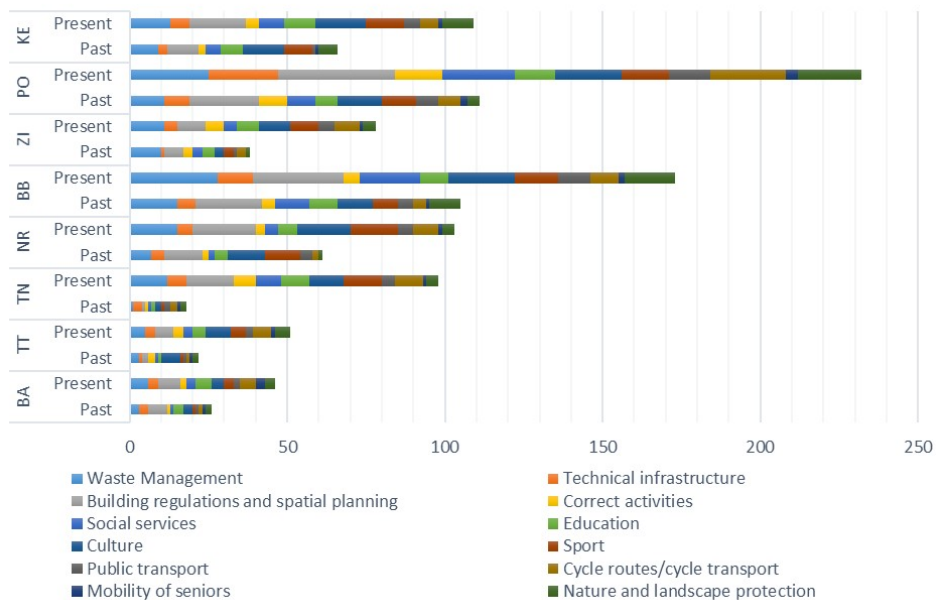
The results of our survey showed that 83% of respondents are currently involved in the cooperation of municipalities and cities in Slovakia, not only within LAGs and CMOs, but also in other formal and informal cooperations. In the framework of these partnerships, the issue of construction and area planning, waste

management and culture is most often addressed (Figure 5).

The reasons for participating in the partnership are primarily saving money and increasing the quality level of services (29% of respondents), spreading the burden on local

governments (10% of respondents), but also inspiring and helping each other (45% of respondents), which was mentioned in the framework of informal cooperation, LAG and contractual agreements regarding State and EU challenges.

Figure 5 Thematic areas of inter-municipal cooperation



Source: own questionnaire survey (2020-2021)

The most frequently solved areas of cooperation between municipalities and cities are issues related to construction regulations and area planning, which are solved by up to 59% of respondents (33% in the past), waste management (47% of respondents) and culture (46% of respondents) through the CMOs. The most noticeable change is the increase in the use of the phenomenon of inter-municipal cooperation occurred in the area of building cycle paths and supporting cycle transport. We calculated the increase in cooperation between cities and municipalities in this direction to the level of 275%.

A gratifying finding is also the fact that in all the areas we have chosen, there is growth, improvement and the building of new

partnerships, despite the fact that several collaborations have ended.

In the case of the termination of partnerships, the respondents mentioned mainly the lack of financial resources (28%), the absence of a suitable challenge (24%) and the lack of personnel capacities (17%). It is pleasing to note that the main reason is not lack of interest or bad experiences with partners, which is generally considered to be the basis of healthy and sustainable cooperation.

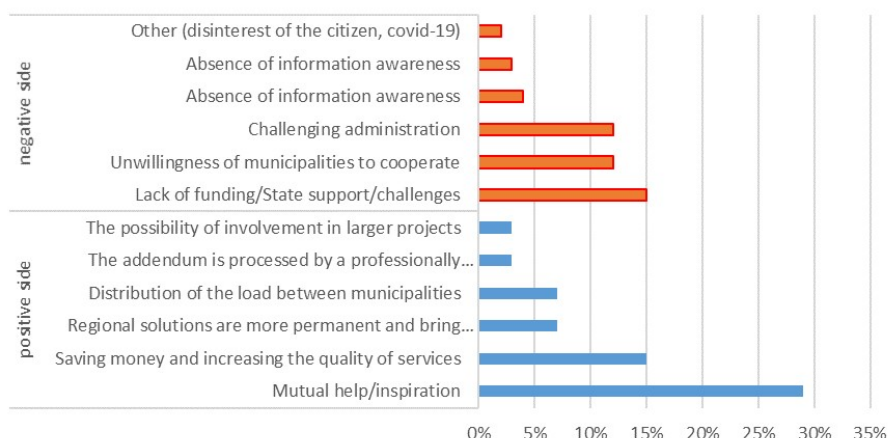
The assumption of the need for reliable and open partners is also confirmed by other statements of the respondents, which relate to the personal views of the cooperation of municipalities and cities (Figure 6). Respondents representing the local self-government, highlight

benefits such as help, inspiration or learning from each other, as well as the fact that cooperation projects save financial resources and increase the quality of services that are intended for users, citizens, residents of municipalities, as well as visitors and entrepreneurs. In addition, thanks to cooperation, municipalities have more opportunities to apply for and participate in more demanding or larger projects announced either by the State or the EU.

However, not all collaborations and experiences show only positive responses. Therefore, the negative aspects of cooperation

between municipalities and cities cannot be neglected. Here, lack of funds was identified as the most serious problem. Due to the lack of funds, the municipalities cannot fully implement and develop cooperation, which is also negatively contributed by the administrative complexity and the burden on the municipalities in the form of the execution of transferred functions. Negative experiences also include the approach and individuality of some partners, whose approach is not correct. Fortunately, only 12% of respondents reported this negative experience.

Figure 6 Inter-municipal cooperation through the eyes of local government representatives



Source: own questionnaire survey (2020-2021)

Despite the aforementioned negative aspects of the issue of inter-municipal cooperation, the positives of these forms of cooperation outweigh the negatives. The possibilities and the search of ways to do things well, and how to help units to grow and develop are the driving forces behind the implementation of small and large cooperation projects.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Due to the significant fragmentation of the residential structure in Slovakia, when up to 65% of municipalities have less than 1000 inhabitants, inter-municipal cooperation is very important, especially for small municipalities, and is many times understood as the only possibility to ensure

the fulfillment of original and transferred competences.

Municipalities, especially the smaller ones, tend to cooperate because of the lack of financial and capacity resources. Larger municipalities, on the other hand, act as responsible and capable guarantors and partners who do not resist new challenges and collaborations.

In the Slovak Republic, municipalities and cities actively use the opportunity to associate not only in the framework of representation, such as The Association of Cities and Municipalities or the Union of Slovak Cities, but also forms that actually cover original and transferred competences, such as microregion institute (373 microregions), common municipal

office (186 CMOs) and local action group (110 LAGs).

From our own survey, focused on the cooperation of municipalities in the SR, it emerged that 83% of respondents are currently involved in any form of cooperation between municipalities within the SR. Among the most frequently mentioned areas of inter-municipal cooperation: construction regulations, area planning, waste management, culture and sports, but also cycle transport and cycle routes, which can be described as a boom of present time. Local governments have an enormous interest in continuing to maintain and build cooperation, with the aim of achieving results that can be used by their citizens in the form of material and immaterial goods. Therefore, many collaborations have a deeper and longer-term impact.

However, the financial funding is identified as one of the biggest problems. Municipalities do

not have enough resources to invest in improving cooperation and projects. Municipalities most often finance cooperation from their own funds/incomes (financially less expensive projects), from grants and grant schemes (financially more expensive projects) and member contributions (financing of small and medium-cost projects).

Municipalities are aware of the benefits of inter-municipal cooperation, as well as of the potential of the partnerships, but also the fact, that it is not possible without the help and support of the State. The lack of funds for the development of local governments is still a topical issue and remains a challenge for the next period as well. Therefore, the State should support and reflect the requirements of municipalities so that they are able to operate sustainably and fulfill the functions that they are supposed to fulfill as the main guarantor.

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