

## THE OPTIMAL SIZE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN SELECTED EU COUNTRIES

Milan DOUŠA

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### **Abstract**

*The residential structure of Slovakia is the result of historical and economic development in specific natural conditions. It is estimated that there are more than 7,000 settlements in Slovakia, which are combined into 2,890 municipalities. There are 138 cities, and more than half of the population lives in them - 58%. The fragmented settlement structure, which is typical for Slovakia, essentially means an above-average representation of small municipalities or too low a figure for the size of the average municipalities. This brings with it a few problems such as a lack of financial resources, weak human capital, and a lack of interest in running for mayor or members of the municipal council. However, what is the optimal size of the municipalities? For many years, it has been one of the most discussed problems in relation to the organization of the state at lower levels. The aim of the article is to point out this problem based on deepening the theoretical knowledge of the forms of residential structures of local governments in the EU with a narrower focus on the Slovak Republic. To achieve the goal, the method of content analysis, description and comparison is used. The result of the article is a clear mapping of the average number of inhabitants in the EU per one administrative unit, the opinions of the leaders of local governments, as well as examples of good practices for the Slovak Republic.*

### **Key words**

*Local Governments, municipalities, settlements, fragmentation, European Union*

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### **Introduction**

If we take a closer look at the self-governing structures at the municipal level within Europe, we will come across extraordinary variability. This statement is valid even though, at least in the last three decades, it was possible to notice several common modernization trends that affected almost all European countries and that de facto led to a reduction in the level of variability. These trends were primarily caused by various decentralization reforms, which in developed countries led to the strengthening of the local level of governance and to the stabilization of the principles of democracy (including openness and participatory creation of public policies), economic efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency. Although national governments were the bearers of the reform measures, various transnational

organizations also played an important role. (Klimovský et al. 2019)

A typical example is the Council of Europe, which, through the ratification process of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, was able to create pressure on various European countries to support their modernization and reform efforts. The European Union can create even more significant pressure on its member organizations, which, however, leaves the sphere of municipal self-government. Almost entirely within the competence of the member countries. The results of the mentioned decentralization reforms were often different. This can be explained not only by the different readiness of individual countries for their implementation but also by the differences in the environments in which they were introduced.

Table 1. The number of municipalities in individual EU and EEA countries, together with the total area in km<sup>2</sup>

2022			
Country	The population	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Number of municipalities
Belgium	11 671 737	30 528	581
Bulgaria	6 520 314	110 370	264
Cyprus	1 216 003	9 251	613
Czech Republic	10 526 937	78 866	6 249
Denmark	5 928 364	42 924	98
Estonia	1 331 796	45 227	227
Finland	5 528 796	338 440	309
France	67 975 000	633 186	34 965
Greece	10 432 481	132 049	335
Netherlands	17 775 710	41 865	352
Croatia	3 871 833	56 594	428
Ireland	5 123 536	70 280	85
Lithuania	2 839 020	65 286	60
Latvia	1 895 400	64 573	109
Luxembourg	645 397	2 586	116
Hungary	9 689 000	93 011	3 154
Malta	519 562	315,4	68
Germany	84 079 811	357 376	10 799
Poland	37 979 000	312 679	2 477
Portugal	10 344 802	92 226	3 400
Austria	9 090 868	83 879	2 095
Romania	19 038 098	238 390	3 181
Slovak republic	5 459 781	49 035	2 890
Slovenia	2 108 977	20 273	212
Spain	47 615 034	505 944	8 131
Sweden	10 514 692	438 574	290
Italy	58 853 482	302 073	7 904
<b>EEA</b>			
Norway	5 425 270	385 207	356
Iceland	372 295	103 000	69
Lichtenstein	38 254	158	11

Source: Own processing according to the CEMR 2022

### Literature review

The optimal size of municipalities in the EU and fragmented settlement structure. Europe offers extraordinary variability in terms of municipal and regional structures. If we look at the number of municipalities and regions, we will see interesting differences and at the same time, we can also reveal certain tendencies that have appeared in recent decades. Looking at the development over the last 60 years, the European framework is dominated by countries in which consolidation tendencies are being enforced in relation to the residential structure (to a greater or lesser extent). Residential structures of countries can be e.g., fragmented (shredded) or, on the contrary, significantly consolidated. Slovakia's residential structure is characterized

by its fragmentation. Similarly, this fact can be stated in the residential structure of the Czech Republic or France, or Ukraine (Davey 2002). The fragmented residential structure inherently means an above-average representation of small municipalities or too low a figure for the size of the average village. A fragmented settlement structure is usually considered a problem, but there are also exceptions to this rule. The issue of countries with too many small municipalities has been a debated topic for decades. This topic also became relevant in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the social and economic changes of the late 80s of the 20th century. Together with the concept of settlement structure, the concept of the optimal size of the village is also related. This term is relatively problematic to define, as there is no uniform

interpretation of how large an optimally "manageable" municipality should be. (Silent 2005)

For many years, it was one of the most discussed problems in relation to the organization of the state at lower levels. Such discussions can already be found in the works of classical philosophers. Plato, in his Republic and Laws, proposed that the ideal city should be large enough to carry out all important functions, yet small enough to maintain the unity of the city. He concluded that the ideal number of inhabitants is seven, i.e. 5040. In the 19th century, the recommendation to organize society into localities caught the attention of utopians. Fourier proposed an organization into communities consisting of 1620 or rather 2000 inhabitants. When we return to more contemporary discussions and solutions, many experts in the field of settlement structure and self-government as such have reached at least a partial consensus, uniting on the number 5000 (Tekeli 2013). In theory, at such a size, the lowest costs should be at the price of the highest performance. In practice, however, this approach is ideal. Currently, experts are mostly inclined to the opinion that the size is different for individual areas of the municipality such as (providing services in education, healthcare, etc.). An example can be a primary school with both grades, which is well organized and managed, e.g. with 3000 inhabitants and e.g. health centre, for which the optimal size of the village is at the level of 2000 inhabitants. The optimal size of the municipality is also defined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Keating (1995) states that the debate on the optimal size of local governments usually focuses on 4 dimensions.

1. Economic efficiency - what size can provide the most services at the least cost?
2. Democracy - what structures can best ensure public control of self-government and adequate accountability?
3. Distribution - what structures provide the most even distribution of tax burden services?
4. Development - what structures are best equipped to support economic growth?

Since small municipalities cover a large part of the territory of the Slovak Republic, their problems have an impact on the performance of

real public services. It is generally known that the minimum size of a municipality should be around 3-5 thousand citizens so that they can provide services sufficiently and efficiently (Belajová al., 2014). The question of size is also important because of the financing of municipalities in Slovakia, which is partly based on the number of inhabitants. Sloboda (2006) adds that not all municipalities with a population of up to 1,000 are able to provide the required public services. Several authors pay attention to the obligations of municipalities in connection with the so-called transferred performance of state administration. The transferred performance of the state administration is carried out, e.g. in the field of education, when municipalities and cities manage primary schools. Financial and technical support from the state is not always sufficient for the performance of such functions, and especially small municipalities have fundamental problems with the implementation of these functions. The quality of the services provided is often closely related to the size of the municipality. Since we do not have municipalities separated in terms of their size and competencies, they must all provide the same package of services regardless of the number of inhabitants or the size of the territory, which brings significant problems in the process of securing public services (Nižňanský 2013). It seems that it would be much more appropriate for municipalities to be responsible for a group of duties according to their size. Small municipalities located in poorly developed regions of Slovakia are very limited in terms of their future development possibilities. The numbers on fragmentation point to some crucial facts. Out of 2,929 municipalities, up to 67% of them have less than 1,000 citizens. However, only 16% of the total population lives in these villages. These numbers show the prevailing asymmetry and highlight the seriousness of the problem. That is why there is often talk of municipal reform. (Swianiewicz 2009, 2010)

The reasons for which it is necessary to consider municipal reform are also connected with unfavorable circumstances that are typical for most small municipalities in Slovakia:

- Lack of job opportunities
- Low employment rate
- Unfavorable age structure of the population
- Poor availability of school and social facilities

- Low financial capacity of municipalities (Swianiewicz 2009, 2010)

From the point of view of covering wages and levy expenses, the optimal municipality should have about 5,000 inhabitants (Nižňanský 2014). A similar claim can be found in Pawl Swianiewicz's book Consolidation or Fragmentation?: The Size of Local Governments in Central and Eastern Europe (Swianiewicz 2002).

In several Western European countries, reforms took place in recent decades, which meant reform of the residential structure. It is obvious that looking at the development over the last 60

years, there was a tendency of consolidation reforms of settlement structures in European countries. In other words, this means that after 1950, a number of countries in Europe reduced the total number of municipalities through the so-called merger reforms (Bonish 2011). The amalgamation of municipalities is often seen as the only way to ensure that municipalities are large enough to be financially and technically capable of providing the wide range of services they are responsible for. In theory, there are many arguments for having fewer municipalities that would be larger. On the other hand, there are also opinions that do not agree with merging municipalities (Slack-Bird 2013).

Table 2: Opinions on various arguments for merging municipalities in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia

	Poland	Czech republic	Slovakia
Overall opinion	-0,85	-0,72	-1,24
Conditions for local democracy	-0,61	-0,7	-0,78
More efficient provision of services	0,16	-0,05	-0,11
Reduction of conflicts between parts of the village	-1,27	-1,03	-1,06
An increase in the range of services provided by the municipality	0,04	-0,05	-0,04
Fair distribution of services among residents	-0,53	-0,56	-0,52
It stimulates contacts between citizens and members of parliament	-0,82	-0,94	-0,82
The increase of local autonomy	0,26	-0,08	-0,17
It helps adapt services to local needs	0,1	-0,13	-0,03
It increases solidarity among the inhabitants of the village	-0,86	-0,64	-0,66
It increases the political involvement of the population	-0,55	-0,38	-0,11
It reduces the need for state transfers	0,02	-0,22	-0,29

The rating scale is -2, the argument is completely unconvincing up to +2

Source: Own processing according to the Swianiewicz 2002

In 2000, mayors from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia were asked about their opinion on the overall idea of merging municipalities. The overall most negative opinion on consolidation is in Slovakia. According to the mayors, there are three strongest arguments against merging: it would increase conflicts between residents, it would reduce support for local democracy, and the relationship between deputies and residents would be more complicated. The most convincing argument against consolidation is the fear of an increase in conflicts between residents. On the other hand, usually the most convincing arguments for consolidation are higher efficiency of service provision, possible increase of local autonomy.

Since 1950, for example, the number of municipalities has decreased in Lithuania by 90%, in Sweden by 87%, in Denmark by 80%, in Belgium by 78%, in Ukraine by 61%, in the Netherlands by 44%, in Austria by 42% and so on further. On the opposite side are countries where the number of municipalities has increased over the past 60 years. However, while in Italy, for example, this increase is only at the level of 2%, in the Czech Republic it is an increase at the level of 51%. There is a similar fragmentation in Slovakia as in the Czech Republic. Up to 92% of all municipalities in Slovakia have less than 3,000 inhabitants. Slovakia has more than 3.5 times the share of mayors and more than twice the share of city deputies per 100,000 inhabitants than the EU

average. Fragmentation of local governments leads to inefficient implementation of self-government. Municipalities with up to 250 inhabitants spend more than half of all expenses on administration, i.e. to the detriment of the development of municipalities and the quality of service provision. (Clark 2000). However, there is one very important difference compared to the Czech Republic. Municipalities in the Czech Republic are divided into categories: each category represents a different type of municipality in terms of powers and competences. In other words, the smallest municipalities are only responsible for a limited range of powers. The larger the municipality, the more powers and competences it has according to the relevant category. On the other hand, in Slovak conditions, the situation is fundamentally different. "In Slovakia, all municipalities are technically equal. The range of competences is

the same for each size of local government. (Berčík, Lovecký 2003)

Fragmentation is not a problem for Slovakia as a whole. The greatest concentration of the problem lies in the northeastern part of Slovakia, mainly within the boundaries of the Prešov self-governing region and in some southern parts of the Banskobystrický self-governing region. In general, it can be said that the east of Slovakia is much more fragmented than it is in the west (Berčík, Lovecký 2003). The eastern part of Slovakia belongs to less economically developed areas within the country. Poor economic and economic conditions, a lower standard of living, and a more fundamental aging of the population characterize this sparsely populated area with a few inhabitants. Most small settlements are located, for example, in the districts of Svidník, Stropkov, Veľký Krtíš or Rimavská Sobota (Nižňanský 2009).

Table 3: Municipalities in individual regions of the Slovak Republic

Region	Number of municipalities		Number of inhabitants		Average number of inhabitants in the municipalities
	Numerical expression	Share of the whole	Numerical expression	Share of the whole	
Bratislavský	73	2,5%	622 706	11,48%	8 530
Trnavský	251	8,7%	561 525	10,35%	2 237
Trenčianský	276	9,7%	599 214	11,05%	2 171
Nitrianský	354	12,2%	705 661	13,01%	1 993
Žilinský	315	10,9%	697 502	12,86%	2 214
Banskobystrický	516	17,8%	653 186	12,04%	1 266
Prešovský	666	23%	807 011	14,88%	1 212
Košický	440	15,2%	778 120	14,33%	1 768
Totally	2891	100%	5 424 925	100%	2 674

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020

### Goal and Methodology

The residential structure of Slovakia is the result of historical and economic development in specific natural conditions. It is estimated that there are more than 7,000 settlements in Slovakia, which are combined into 2,890 municipalities. There are 138 cities, and more than half of the population lives in them - 58%. The fragmented settlement structure, which is typical for Slovakia, essentially means an above-average representation of small municipalities or too low a figure for the size of the average municipalities. This brings with it a few problems such as a lack of financial resources, weak human capital and a lack of interest in

running for mayor or members of the municipal council.

The aim of the article is to point out this problem based on deepening the theoretical knowledge of the forms of residential structures of local governments in the EU with a narrower focus on the Slovak Republic. To achieve the aim, the method of content analysis, description and comparison is used. The result of the article is a mapping of the average number of inhabitants in the EU per one administrative unit, the opinions of the leaders of local governments, as well as examples of good practices for the Slovak Republic.

### Findings and Discussion

The basic level of territorial self-government is the municipality, which is equipped by law with independent competences, powers and responsibilities. Approximately 80,000 municipalities or their equivalent units are in the EU 27 countries. Local administrative units (Local Administration Units - LAU). The term local administrative unit was defined by the EU and replaces the statistical administrative units NUTS 5 (LAU level 2) and NUTS 4 (LAU level 1) at the local level. In most countries, LAU 2 are identical to the basic level of territorial self-government - municipalities, but there are also countries where this is not the case and LAUs reflect only the territorial-administrative division of the state (e.g. in Lithuania, Bulgaria, Ireland, Portugal) (Provazníková 2009). In terms of the number of LAU-2, more than 50 per cent of them belong to only five countries: France accounts for 30% of European municipalities, Germany 11%, Spain and Italy each 6.7% and

the Czech Republic 5%. Table No. 4 illustrates the data.

- The average size of the population per village is approximately 5,000. The Slovak Republic (1,800), France, the Czech Republic (approx. 1,600), Cyprus (1,500) and Ireland (approx. 1,200) have the smallest average number of inhabitants per municipality:

- In the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania, and Portugal, the average number of inhabitants per municipality is higher than 30,000, in other countries, municipalities have an average of more than 10,000 inhabitants: In Bulgaria (29,000), Belgium (17,735), Poland (15,495), Finland (11,741), Greece (10,230) and Slovenia (10,350), Latvia (17,500), Norway (11,000).

- The average number of inhabitants per municipality is less than 5000 in eight countries + 2 EEA: Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria, Slovak Republic, Iceland and Lichtenstein.

Table 4: Average number of inhabitants in the EU per local administrative unit

Country	Number LAU-1	Number of inhabitants
Belgium	581	17 735
Bulgaria	264	29 000
Cyprus	613	1 500
Czech Republic	6 249	1 636
Denmark	98	55 000
Estonia	227	5 900
Finland	309	11 741
France	34 965	1 651
Greece	325	10 230
Netherlands	352	37 000
Croatia	428	8 000
Ireland	85	1 200
Lithuania	60	59 000
Latvia	109	17 500
Luxembourg	116	3 790
Hungary	3 175	3 078
Malta	68	5 900
Germany	10 799	6 900
Poland	2 477	15 495
Portugal	308	34 000
Austria	2 095	3 530
Romania	3 181	6 950
Slovak republic	2 890	1 839
Slovenia	212	10 350
Spain	8 131	5 900
Sweden	290	31 000
Italy	7 904	7 200
Norway	356	11 000
Iceland	69	3 600
Lichtenstein	11	3 170

Source: Own processing 2023 according to data from the Slovak Statistical Office, Eurostat 2018-2022, CEMR 2023

Differences between countries in the number of municipalities and the number of inhabitants per municipality have reasons not only historical and geographical but are also the result of the centralization policy that some countries practiced to limit the number of municipalities and increase their size. To counter the disadvantages resulting from the small size of the municipalities (limited tax base, insufficient financial resources for the implementation of competences, the impossibility of realizing economies of scale, and low professional and qualification levels in the proceedings), they solved this problem:

- Merger of municipalities by law - e.g. in Belgium, Germany, Austria, Holland, Sweden.
- Association and cooperation of municipalities - based on the cooperation of municipalities and the pooling of their resources for the implementation of certain services and activities. Cooperation between municipalities can be voluntary or mandatory. Cooperation in the implementation of certain competencies in Finland, Austria, Ireland, Great Britain is mandatory. Cooperation can also be supported by a system of subsidies, such as in France, Hungary, Estonia. (Provazníková 2009)

The association and cooperation of local governments can take different forms:

1. Authorization of a certain body to carry out a certain mission on behalf of the local governments that authorized it to do so.
2. Provision of employees of one local government to other municipalities.
3. Management of a joint body based on an agreement reached between local governments.
4. Creation of a structure for cooperation, which is already, assigned a separate person and funds to manage joint activities.

### **Examples of good practice for the Slovak Republic**

None of the countries of the The Visegrad Group has such a significantly consolidated structure of municipalities as *LITHUANIA*. When looking at the other Eastern and Central European countries of the former socialist bloc, it can be seen that only a few of these countries partially approach this limit (municipalities in Belarus, for example, have an average size exceeding 46,000 inhabitants, the average size of municipalities in

Serbia exceeds the limit of 43,000 inhabitants, the average size of municipalities in Montenegro exceeds 32,000 inhabitants, and the average size of municipalities in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Bulgaria reaches the level of approximately 29,000 inhabitants). (Klimovský 2012)

Due to the structure of municipalities, Lithuania can be characterized in the European context as one of the most consolidated countries. The average size of Lithuanian municipalities exceeds the level of 59,000 inhabitants, which is comparable to, for example, Danish conditions. On average, Danish municipalities have a size of about 55 thousand inhabitants.

Lithuanian municipalities are also exceptionally large in terms of their average area. This currently reaches the level of almost 1090 km<sup>2</sup>, which is comparable only to Belarus (the average area of Belarusian municipalities is at a level of almost 990 km<sup>2</sup>) and the Nordic countries (the average area of municipalities in Sweden is more than 1550 km<sup>2</sup>, in Iceland it is approximately 980 km<sup>2</sup>, in Norway, almost 890 km<sup>2</sup> and in Finland, approximately 815 km<sup>2</sup>). Just like Slovakia and Lithuania, it has recently undergone turbulent development and is currently heavily affected by the economic and political crisis. Both countries share a very similar foreign-political orientation, the clear manifestations of which are the entry of both countries into such international political groupings as the EU, OECD, NATO, etc. Lithuania and Slovakia are among the small EU countries. And last but not least, what unites Slovakia and Lithuania is that, despite the relatively extensive preparation of various reform measures aimed at public administration, most of the decisions taken were largely influenced by top party politics (Švec, Macura, Štôl 1996)

### **Conclusion**

The residential structure of Slovakia is characterized by a number of small municipalities and a high number of residential units overall. The issue of fragmentation of municipalities was not on the table during the socialist regime, because Slovak municipalities did not really function as real units of self-government. However, after the gentle revolution and the change in the social and

economic system, this question became a much-discussed matter. The Slovak settlement structure is very rare. Currently, there are about 2,890 municipalities (originally 2,927) and townships in Slovakia, despite the fact that a slight decrease in the number of municipalities was recorded in the last decade. However, the structure of settlements is very fragmented. The numbers on fragmentation point to fundamental facts. The trend is visible primarily in eastern Slovakia, in the Prešov and regions of Banská Bystrica. Another problem is the fact that all municipalities are technically equal. The range of competences is the same for each size of local government. The law determines a certain condition when a municipality can be declared a city. The only municipal size category regulated by a special law is a municipality (city) with more than 200,000 inhabitants.

The very existence of small municipalities is linked to a wider range of problems that are directly related to the parameters of the settlement structure. Since the local budgets of municipalities are largely influenced by the size of the municipality, they are often so low that the

municipality is unable to provide even basic services. Fundamental solutions for changing the residential structure can de facto be implemented through the so-called merger reforms. These reforms have taken place in many countries (especially in Western Europe) in recent decades. The residential structure of Slovakia could thus be significantly consolidated, and larger municipalities could subsequently become more decentralized. In other words, if we had more large municipalities and a lower proportion of small municipalities, we could transfer more functions to municipalities and highlight their scope. A good example of reform measures are the Baltic, Scandinavian and BENELUX countries.

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#### Contact

PhDr. Milan Dousa, PhD.  
Department of Economics and Management of Public Administration  
Faculty of Public Administration  
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice  
Popradská 66, 040 11 Košice  
e-mail: milan.dousa@upjs.sk