

COMPARISON OF 20 YEARS OF REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

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The article aims to compare the regional level in Slovakia and the Czech Republic two decades after the regionalisation process started. The comparison is devoted to the election of the highest representative, the current competence framework at the regional level, and finding out which competence the heads of the Slovak and Czech regions consider to be the most important and examples of good practices too. Besides this, the article is devoted to the comparison of regional financing systems in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, regional competencies in crisis situations, and challenges for Slovak and Czech self-administration units. The answers to these topics are based on the analysis of the questionnaire sent to the Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8 and the heads of the Czech regions. After 20 years, the regions have been a fixed part of the public administration system and they are proof that the decentralized solution strengthens the stability of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Key words: regional self-government; regions; comparison; representatives.

1 INTRODUCTION

As we mentioned in the abstract, the main aim of the article is to compare the regional level in two countries of central Europe through the analysis of primary and secondary data. The subjects of the comparison are the basic characteristics of the regions as example the election of the highest representatives, the competence framework, financing systems, and competencies during crises. In this article, the comparative method was primarily used to compare regional levels in two states.

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Before proceeding with the context, it is necessary to define the most relevant terms used in the text. The multidisciplinary scientific discipline of Regional Studies is devoted to defining the term region. According to Michael Keating, the region acquires various forms in different places and relates to different spatial levels. Examining the essence of the term, Keating pointed to the location of the region somewhere between the level of the nation-state and the local level. He defines the regional level as a space for the intervention of many actors of all levels, from supranational to local (Rýsová 2009). For a long period of time, Viktor Nižňanský's research has been focused on the definition of the region. In the view of the plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Decentralization of Public Administration in 1999-2001 and since 2003, the region represents an area that is internally cohesive, appropriately economically and culturally self-sufficient, and thus capable of adequate autonomy (Nižňanský 2006, 54).

Now the definition of the region mainly reflects the characteristics of the territory set aside for political and territorial administration, which points to the prevailing trend emphasizing the need to transfer from the centre to lower hierarchical levels. Therefore, regional and local authorities achieve independence to a certain extent in a limited range of matters, which is also supported by primary European Union law to apply the principle of subsidiarity as widely as possible. Nowadays, the definition of the region is approached as an administrative unit, which is perceived as a space providing opportunities for broad civic participation (Čajka et al. 2005; Čajka 2020).

In the year 2020, the Czech regions commemorated twenty years from the first regional elections that were held in December 2000. In Slovakia, the first regional elections took place in December 2001. The adaptation to the set competence framework, as well as the allocated financial volume, is typical of the Slovak and Czech regions' operation over a twenty-year period. The regions of Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the implementers of selected public policies representing a wide range of activities, with certain similarities and differences. Each region in Europe represents local socio-economic, cultural, or natural specifics. The effort to develop the territory is a recurring feature. The regional level in both states is still largely unknown to the public. Its competence framework is often mistaken by the inhabitants of the regions with the competencies of municipalities or the state level. According to the representatives of the Slovak and Czech regions, the knowledge of the competence framework from the side of the regional inhabitants and their identity with the existence and functioning of the regional self-government is a never-ending story. However, because the regions have been a permanent part of the public administration system for the past 20 years, it is necessary to work on a continuous process of knowledge of regional competencies. Effective and improved communication of the regions' irreplaceable tasks is important for the direction of regional development. The inhabitants must understand how they can contact the regions and how the self-governments can assist them.

Using the method of self-observation² and experiences at the regional level, the

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authors offer an insight into the main differences of functioning at the regional level in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. These states had a long joint history in the 20th century. The first administrative structure was created in the scope of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1923. Within it, regions in the Czech part and counties in the Slovak part were established. This structure was exercised for several years. The territory of Slovakia was divided into six counties, and the administrative structure was in place until 1928 when it was replaced by a regional establishment valid throughout Czechoslovakia, while Slovakia formed one country. The subsequent change came in 1938 when Hungary seized the frontier districts in southern and south-eastern Slovakia after the Vienna Arbitration. After 1940, the two-stage political administration was reinstated; the territory of an independent Slovak State reverted to a six-county structure, with 59 districts. After the Second World War, the structure of the countries was restored. In 1949, the regional classification was established, with 14 regions on Czech territory and six regions in Slovakia. A new reorganization of the territorial division of Czechoslovakia took place in 1960, creating eight regions in the Czech Republic and three in Slovakia. Since the end of the 1960s, Bratislava was added as a separate entity. This system lasted until 1990 (Bardovič et al. 2018; Gurňák and Lauko 2007).³ For the period after 1990 is typical the absence of the regional level.

In the year 1989, the wave of democratic revolutions took place. This significant moment in history enabled the recognition of the political party's system. The changes took place in many areas, ranging from the political to the economic to the social area. The Czech and Slovak Federative Republic was no exception. The changes had an impact on the regional level because ineffective public administration slowed the overall reform of the economy and political system (Slavík 2022). The decentralization was a helpful tool for democratization in the countries of central and Eastern Europe. The reforms of the public administration⁴ were the key component typical for the transformation process in the mentioned countries. Based on the reforms, the territory governance authorities were created, not only on the local level but also on the regional level. The establishment of the regional level in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (as in Poland and Hungary as members of the Visegrad Group) was determined by the effort to enter European Union. The significant point was the process of the redeployment of the part of the competencies from the state administration bodies to the self-government. Thanks to the decentralization, the quality of the governance in the country is improving. The decision is closer to those who will be affected by it (Krnáč 2007).

Modern public administration can be defined as the state of the company's organization in which competence, powers, and responsibilities are divided among public administration institutions. In addition, it is characterized by good legislation, compliance, and law enforcement capabilities. It is also characterized by the high professionalism and ethics of public administration employees. These characteristics were only partially met in the V4 countries following the 1990s public administration reforms. It could be understood because of a decades-long

Association of the Self-Governing Regions SK8, consisting of all eight Slovak self-governing regions.

³ The summary can be also found in the document of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky 2007).

⁴ In general, public administration reforms are being implemented to create a rational and efficient system of organization of state administration and self-government. The goal of these steps is a simple and efficient organizational structure. Equally important in this process is the gradual simplification of organizational fragmentation (Slavík 2022; Janas 2007).

totalitarian system in which public administration was seen as an instrument of power and not as a service to the citizen. The reasons were the unfinished model of its organization, insufficient control or growth and inefficiency of its expenditures. Public administration problems also stemmed from the poor legislative environment, inappropriate governance, confusion, non-incentive, and unfair funding (Nižňanský 2006; Novotný 2017). They were often joined by inappropriate territorial and administrative arrangements, neglective employee training, and a low level of knowledge of public administration. The aim was, therefore, to address these problems, as only “an efficient, and flexible public administration, oriented towards public service, can create the conditions for valuing the human, natural and productive potential of regions, in favour of increasing the quality of life of citizens” (Nižňanský 2006, 36).

Despite many years in the joint state, the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic was dissolved in 1993 into two individual states –Slovakia and the Czech Republic. These new states needed to establish domestic governance and approached the creation of public administration and governance principles. Although the constitutions of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, adopted in the 1992, reckoned to the creation of the self-governing regions, the highest authorities in both states approached this step after the new millennium. The establishment of this level of self-government requested the approval of additional laws for the specification of the problematic of the territorial self-administration units.⁵ The aim of both states was the accession to the European Union, and the creation of the regional level represented one of the conditions. In Slovakia, eight self-governing regions were established, while fourteen regions were established in the Czech Republic (Buček 2011; Leška 2015).

According to Act no.302/2001 Coll. on Self-Government of Higher Territorial Units, the so-called Act on Self-Governing Regions, the mentioned self-administration unit in Slovakia represents an independent territorial self-governing and administrative unit. In this act, regional self-government is defined as a legal entity that independently manages its property and income under the conditions laid down by law. Besides this, it secures and protects the rights and interests of its inhabitants. According to this act, the chairman of the self-administration unit and the council of the self-governing region belong to the bodies of the Slovak regions. Their main task consists of securing the universal development of its territory and the needs of its inhabitants (Act on Self-Governing Regions 2001).

According to Act no.129/2000 Coll. on Regions, the region in the Czech Republic is defined as the territorial community of citizens who have the right to self-government. Besides this, the region is a public corporation with its property and income. In contrast to the Slovak self-governing regions, the Czech regions have more bodies; apart from the highest representative and the regional parliament, there is also the regional council and the regional office. They together are responsible for the overall development of the regional territory and the needs of its citizens (Act on Regions 2000).

The difference resides in the expressed number of representatives in the regional parliament. According to relevant acts, the determinative factor is the size of the regional population. In Slovakia, the number of deputies is determined by the regional parliament in the range of 12 thousand to 15 thousand inhabitants per

⁵ Act no. 221/1996 Coll. on Territorial and Administrative Division of the Slovak Republic 1996; Act no. 222/1996 Coll. on the Organization of Local State Administration 1996.

deputy (Act on Self-Governing Regions 2001). According to Act no.129/2000 Coll., the Czech region, with a population of 600 thousand inhabitants, has 45 members in the regional parliament. The unit with a population of 600 to 900 thousand inhabitants has 55 members in the regional parliament. The regional parliament has 65 members from the self-government, which has a population of over 900 thousand inhabitants. The regional office headed by the director carries out the administration of the region. In contrast to the Slovak regions, the director is named by the chairman with the approval of the minister of interior. The regional parliament sets up three obligatorily committees; the financial, controlling, and the education and employment committee. The regional parliament can also establish controlling and initiative committees, as well as other specialized committees (Act on Regions 2000; Grejták et al. 2002). The regional parliament in Slovakia establishes the financial and mandate commission and other commissions as its constant or temporary consultative, initiative, and controlling bodies. The regional office headed by the director is responsible for ensuring administrative and organizational affairs of the parliament, chairman, and other bodies (Act on Self-Governing Regions 2001).

To defend the interests of the regions and their inhabitants, the formation of interest associations comprised of individual territorial self-administration units was initiated. In Slovakia, the Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8 was founded in Bratislava in 2006. It has always been a voluntary, interest-based, and independent association (Jánošková 2020; Jánošková 2021). In the Czech Republic, the Association of the Regions of the Czech Republic was formed only one year after the regional level was implemented.

Both associations fulfil the role of the speaker and the representative of all units towards the national level and their bodies - legislative and executive. They promote the regions' joint interests and help the regions in actively developing their self-governing functions. Moreover, when carrying out their competencies, their impressive task is the unification of various opinions, ideas, and processes. The Association of the Regions of the Czech Republic perceives itself as the collective voice of the regions (Association of Regions of the Czech Republic 2022). Besides this, both organizations offer the opportunity to share concrete examples and exchange experiences in many areas of public administration. The sessions of both organizations are held four times a year. They create the organizational scheme with the chairman and the highest joint body consisting of representatives of all regions. The secretariats or offices were established for effective operation. In both cases, it is possible to create initiative and consultative bodies. Apart from many similar characteristics, the length of the term in office differs. The chairman of the Association of Self-Governing Regions is elected for two and a half years, whilst the chairman of the Association of the Regions of the Czech Republic is elected for two years (Statutes of the Association of the Self-Governing Regions SK8 2006; Statutes of the Association of the Regions of the Czech Republic 2002).

In the Czech Republic, the effective legislative also recognizes the so-called cohesion regions in connection with the implementation of European Structural and Investment Funds. In this case, their territorial districts coincide with one or more territorial districts of the regions. There are a total of 8 cohesion regions. In each, the regional council of the cohesion region is established and holds the status of a legal entity. At the same time, the regional council acts as the managing authority of the regional operational program of the respective cohesion region. The council sets up three bodies - the committee, the chairman, and the office.

Committee members are elected by the regional parliaments. The key criterion for filling the committee's positions is whether the cohesion region is made up of the territory of a single region or several. If it consists of the territory of one region, the committee has 15 members; if it consists of two or three territorial self-administration units, the concerned regional parliaments elect eight members (Klimovský 2010).

2 THE COMPARISON OF SLOVAK AND CZECH REGIONAL LEVELS; THE DIFFERENCES IN THE ELECTION OF THE HIGHEST REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REGIONS

The highest representatives of the regions in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, who are responsible for the administration of the region and its representation internally and externally, are elected differently. The direct choice method is used in Slovakia to elect regional heads, whereas the indirect choice method is used in the Czech Republic. Both have their advantages and disadvantages.

According to the representatives of the regional level in Slovakia, the advantages of direct election lie mainly in the fact that they obtain votes in a direct mandate from voters to whom they are responsible for decisions and performance of their functions. The heads of the regions represent the self-governing regions externally, act as their statutes, and at the same time decide on matters related to the rights and obligations of natural and legal persons if the decision has been entrusted by law to the higher territorial unit.

The highest representative of the regional level in Slovakia is elected directly by the citizens of the regions, not by regional parliaments and deputies. His removal is possible based on a referendum initiated by regional deputies. In this case, at least 50% of voter turnout is necessary. Most of them must speak out in favour of dismissing the chairman, which may seem to be a disadvantage of direct election. However, it should be added that regarding the current turnout in the Slovak regional elections,⁶ this is an unrealistic possibility.

Based on the above, it is possible to conclude that the advantage of direct selection of Slovak regional heads is greater legitimacy than indirect selection. The direct, secret, and equal election of the chairman of a self-governing region, as opposed to indirect choice, avoids stalemate situations that may arise if the regional parliament is unable to agree on a joint candidate or the proposed candidate is not elected by members of parliament.

In contrast to the elections of chairmen of Slovak regions, regional elections in the Czech Republic use an indirect choice of regional heads. In the election, the inhabitants vote for political parties, and the 5 percent limit must be met. After the elections, the chairman is elected as the highest representative by the regional parliament, and the council is elected. We can state that the position of the highest representative is weaker; only crisis situations are an exception. In these situations, the act confers more important competencies to the chairman. The Integrated rescue system falls under the competence of the chairman, and it

⁶ The last regional elections were characterized by low voter turnout; almost only 30% of eligible voters came to the polls (Horváth and Urc 2021). According to Haydanka (2021), "elections to the Regional Assembly have never been a priority for Slovaks, as is traditionally the case in the post-socialist countries" (Haydanka 2021, 9).

requires cooperation with the bodies at the central level (Act on Integrated Rescue System 2000).

The chairmen themselves perceive the advantage of indirect election. They can rely on a coalition majority in the decision-making process of the parliament. However, there must be consistency in the direction of the regional bodies between the highest representative, the regional parliament, and the regional council. As a disadvantage, the election of the chairman is the result of political agreements, which may be different from the majority opinion of citizens. However, according to own experiences of the highest representatives, the indirect choice is an advantage. The rationale of the statement is the fact that it is the only possible way to prevent a situation when the chairman bears a great deal of responsibility but does not have a real opportunity to influence the matters. The head needs to have the majority on his side in the regional parliament. It is a proven principle.

According to the chairmen, the direct election divides society at all levels, including at the regional level. If the directly elected chairman, as the highest representative of the region, did not have a majority in the regional parliament, he would not be able to administrate the region. The regional representatives themselves are inclined to believe that the indirect election system has proved its worth for more than 20 years, and therefore when something works for a long time, there is no reason to change it. However, the representatives of the Czech regions also agree that direct election would have a major disadvantage in suppressing the importance and influence of smaller political entities, which have a coalition potential. The prevailing opinion is that the direct election of the regional heads would strongly polarize the political situation in the regions.

3 THE DIFFERENCE IN THE COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK OF SLOVAK AND CZECH REGIONS

The regions in Slovakia and the Czech Republic function according to the competence framework laid down by the Act no.302/2001 Coll. on Self-Government of Higher Territorial Units and Act no.129/2000 Coll. on Regions.

In Slovakia, the current competence framework covers essentially all areas except defence and security. These competencies include road management and maintenance of roads of the II. and III. classes, specialized social care secured through social service facilities, health care and the administration of the outpatient and pharmacy network, secondary education and training, regional culture, regional development, and tourism.

After 20 years, representatives of Slovak higher territorial units see room for a new redistribution of competencies between the state, regions, and municipalities. This reallocation could be a part of a further public administration reform. Those competencies in which the regions are effective should be strengthened. It includes, in particular, the services at the supra-local level i.e. at the level between the municipality and the entire state. The strengthening of competencies would affect secondary education and social care. Transport could be another area of consolidation of the competence framework. Following the example of the Czech Republic, the provision of integrated public transport, not only suburban bus transport but regional rail transport too, could be added to the competencies of the regions.

TABLE 1: BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REGIONAL LEVEL IN SLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

	Regional level in Slovakia	Regional level in the Czech Republic
First regional elections	2001	2000
Number of regions	8	14
Average size of regions	6 129,25 km ²	5 632,75 km ²
Average population of regions	682 234 inhabitants	763 853 inhabitants
Main finances	single-source funding based on personal income tax revenue	share of the revenues of common taxes set by an act
Regional bodies	2 – Regional parliament and chairman	5 – Regional parliament, Regional Council, chairman, office and special regional authorities
Elections of the highest representative	Direct electoral choice	Indirect electoral choice
Regional association	Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8	Association of Regions of the Czech Republic
Bodies of the regional association	Chairman, assembly, sections and office	Chairman, council, commissions and office
Term of the chairman of the regional association	Two and a half years	Two years
Number of vocational commissions / sections	9	15

Sources: own processing based on the data of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2020), Czech Statistical Office (Český štatistický úrad 2020), Act on Self-Governing Regions, Act on Regions, Statutes of the Association of the Self-Governing Regions SK8 and Statutes of the Association of the Regions of the Czech Republic.

In the field of culture, the self-governing regions grouped in the Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8 would welcome the intensification of support for regional cultural institutions or the creation of a legislative environment enabling the establishment of new type institutions for artistic creation and creative industries. Higher territorial units are prepared to take over some competencies from the district authorities. In this case, SK8, represented by the heads of self-governing regions, is convinced that the cities and municipalities or the state could take over the several competencies of district authorities. The Czech combined model of state administration and self-government could be an inspiration. The key competence needed for the territory's sustainable development is competence around spatial planning and the environment.

Regarding the most important competence among the competence framework, it can be stated that the importance of the set powers for individual regions depends on the challenges of the counties. The regions themselves determine their priority themes, which define the direction of regional development. At present, self-governing regions in Slovakia have the ambition to participate in topics that do not fall within their competencies, such as drinking water supply or waste management solutions. In the future, in the context of demographic development, the most important area of competence will probably be authority related to social care. The area of regional transport is also indispensable, namely roads of II. and III. classes, which are used daily by 43% of the population of Slovakia. Regional secondary education cannot be forgotten because it plays a significant role in the education of graduates of vocational schools needed for the labour market.

The competencies of the regions in the Czech Republic are in principle sufficient concerning their position in the public administration system. But territorial self-

administration units themselves admit that they have many responsibilities, and many public expectations are associated with them, which is not always in line with sufficient regional competencies. Such an example is education, which has remained firmly under central control, and the regions are in the role of the clear mediator. Furthermore, in healthcare, where the regions have a responsibility to operate a first aid medical service but lack the necessary tools to do so. There would be a lot more examples like this.

Transport, health care, spatial planning, protection of healthy living conditions and social care, education in the secondary school system, cultural development, and conservation of the public order are among the competencies included in the Czech Republic's regional competence framework (Klimovský 2010). In transportation, the regions are responsible for the maintenance of the roads of II. and III. classes, as well as for regional railway transportation. Besides this, the state helps the regions with funding for the reconstruction of the roads through the State Fund of Transport Infrastructure. Funding is determined annually by an agreement reached between the Czech government and regional representatives. The functioning of the State Fund of Transport Infrastructure was the subject of interest of the Slovak chairmen during the common meeting with the representatives of the Czech regions in 2019 and 2020. The idea of the creation of the road fund in Slovakia was a concrete good example of practice and possible inspiration. Through this fund, the state would participate in the reconstruction of roads of II. and III. classes. The same idea started to be promoted by the Association of the Self-Governing Regions under the lead of its chairman Jozef Viskupič in 2019. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic prepared the suggestion of the establishment and functioning of the Fund of the Transport Infrastructure. The intention for the systematic financing of the building, modernization, and maintenance of road infrastructure is made according to the model of the surrounding states, primarily the Czech Republic ('Na zriadenie fondu dopravnej infraštruktúry je najvyšší čas, voláme po ňom od roku 2019' 2022).

The issue of financing the individual regional competencies is also closely connected with the competence framework. For regions, it would be appropriate to have a larger share of their revenues (especially a share of joint tax revenues) and a smaller share of non-entitlement contributions and subsidies. Regions (and municipalities) in the Czech Republic have their revenues in the form of a statutory share of joint taxes (the so-called budget determination of taxes). They can also manage their property and money independently. Therefore, the representatives of the regions agree that decisions about the regional budget and the principles of territorial development (i.e., spatial planning) are among the most important. The head of the Karlovy Vary Region Petr Kulhánek believes that the most important competence is the responsibility for the available and high-quality regional health care.

The position of the Czech regions is specific because the regional parliaments have the legislative initiative. It is the next good example practice that could inspire the Slovak regions. The subject of the mutual meetings between the chairmen of the Slovak and Czech regions was the comparison of the competence framework and the possible examples for inspiration in transportation, social care, health care, secondary education, and the regional policy within the competencies. Besides the legislative initiative, the representatives of the Czech regions have rich experiences from the meetings with the representatives of the state level.

3.1 The Difference in the Competencies at the Regional Level During Crisis Situations – Covid-19 Pandemic

During the coronavirus pandemic situation, the regions in Slovakia became crisis management bodies. Thanks to amendments to relevant laws, the roles of higher territorial units in state crisis management have been strengthened. It was the initiative of the Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8. The reinforcement was reflected in that the crisis staff of the self-governing region became the crisis management coordinating body. As a result of the change, regions in positions of crisis management bodies now have not only defined rights but also obligations.

In this case, it reflected reality in the legislation after the regions actively participated in the coordination of the fight against the spread of the new virus on their territory during the first wave of the COVID - 19 pandemic. The contribution of self-governing regions was also reflected in the suggestion of measures at the regional and national levels, which were based on their own practical experience. Through them, the self-governing regions helped to correct the ideas of individual ministries.

The Slovak regional self-governments made a direct contribution to the fight against COVID - 19, despite the absence of staff, equipment and distribution channels. They redistributed protective funds from state supplies to all public and non-public social service facilities in the region, as well as ambulances and hospitals in counties under their founding competence.

As we mentioned above, the Crisis Act in the Czech Republic gives the relevant competencies to the highest representatives of the regional level. However, the coronavirus pandemic has shown in practice that the powers need to be partially adjusted. The adjustment of competencies is being prepared. Formally, the external powers of regional crisis management bodies are quite sufficient, although quite confusing (mostly vaguely defined). Moreover, they are not sufficiently accompanied by financial resources. The authority of the head is included in §14 clauses 3 and 4 of Act no. 240/2000 Coll., the so-called Crisis Management, which solves the readiness of the region in the field of crisis management. The chairman can coordinate rescue and liquidation work, care for children and minors (through designated schools), and can order work duties, for example for paramedics. The highest representative of the region can declare a state of danger and issue crisis measures within the state of emergency in the regional conditions. The special tasks department is responsible for crisis management at the regional office. The chairman and mayors are authorized to make key decisions for the management of emergencies and crises. The chairman and mayors of municipalities with extended powers set up a security council as their coordinating body for crisis preparation. Furthermore, they set up crisis staff as their working body for crisis management (Act on Crisis Management 2000). According to Act no. 241/2000 Coll., on Emergency Economic Measures for Crisis Situations, the head of the region is entitled to order the supplies of products and services, use premises, or regulate or organize transport (for example, ban on boarding through the front door, sale of tickets (more in §21 of Act No. 241/2000 Coll. on Emergency Economic Measures for Crisis Situations).

During the coronavirus pandemic, all regions and many municipalities replaced the role of the state. The situation would not be managed without the active involvement of the regions, their organizations (i.e., hospitals, emergency medical services, residential social facilities, etc.), and municipalities. At the same

time, due to the nature of the matter, it was a problem in the entire territory of the state. According to the legal order, it should have been dealt with by the government, the bodies of the sanitary service, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Interior, and the State Material Reserves Administration.

According to the heads of the Czech regions, the state level and sanitary service have failed because they were unprepared for crisis activity and a pandemic. The government and ministries gave orders to regions and municipalities in unofficial ways (through media statements, press conferences, e-mails, text messages, videoconferencing sharing requests, and through the creation of media pressure), while using official legal means only minimally. According to the chairmen, the management of the pandemic was chaotic.

The regions had only a limited opportunity to use legal instruments to manage crises, due to the nature of the crisis. However, crisis staff in all regions functioned successfully, and effective decisions were made by chairmen within the legal order. Sometimes it was on the margins of the law when this was justified by the need for rapid action. The goodwill, sense of practicality, and objective orientation were strongly evident in the activities of regions and municipalities. The regions had to decide whether to declare regional states of danger individually when the national state of emergency was not prolonged. Although it did not correspond to the nature of the threat, the regions declared the state of regional danger to help manage the situation. This was also proof of the centre's failure as well as an expression of regional responsibility.

4 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE FINANCING SYSTEMS OF THE SLOVAK AND CZECH REGIONS

Self-governing regions in Slovakia have pointed out for a long time the inadequacy of the current financing system at the regional level. For regions, single-source funding based on personal income tax revenue is unpredictable. The proposed solution again draws inspiration from the Czech model; it is the introduction of regional financing from the share of the selection of either more taxes or even all taxes.

Slovak higher territorial units in several areas of competence cannot eliminate investment debt and ensure regional development themselves. The most significant of these is transportation. Due to the deteriorating condition of the road network, it is proposed to create a road fund, which would be a source of financing for the modernization and construction of roads of II. and III. classes owned by individual regions. In addition to the condition of the roads, the unresolved issue of land ownership under the ways must be addressed.

According to the highest representatives, the system of financing is currently set up appropriately in the Czech regions. They also agree that the concrete amount of the tax share in the budget allocation will always be discussed. The state is convinced that it provides enough funding. The local governments, on the contrary, feel a lack of funds within the system of financing regions.

For regions, it would be appropriate to have a larger share of their revenues (especially a share of the revenues of common taxes) and a smaller proportion of non-eligible contributions and subsidies. The biggest problems are insufficient systemic, predictable, and long-term stable coverage of the financing of social

services and road management and maintenance of the II. and III. classes. The Head of the Karlovy Vary Region, for example, would propose the elimination of unbalanced financing of hospitals. The faculty and regional hospitals are financed unequally, while regional ones are disadvantaged. Regional authorities in the Czech Republic also perform delegated state administration. It means that the state delegates responsibilities and competencies in the performance of state administration to the regional level. However, the performance of this state administration is not fully financed by the state. The state only contributes to the performance of state administration at the regional level, not the full coverage of costs.

5 THE CHALLENGES FOR REGIONS IN SLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The biggest challenge for the Slovak self-governing regions is the completion of decentralization in the form of public administration reform. According to representatives of higher territorial units, this reform should be based on the principle of subsidiarity and strengthening the fiscal autonomy of the regions. The reform should consist of an important step, which is the accession to the municipal consolidation. Also included is a targeted redistribution of competencies between the highest central level, the middle stage - self-governing regions - and the lowest level, which are municipalities - villages and cities. These measures would have an impact and contribute to the efficient functioning of public administration.

The emphasis in public administration reform is on ensuring that the delegation of powers is real. It is equally important to eliminate duplications. Transparency of the competence framework is welcome to improve citizens' awareness of public administration and strengthen the legitimacy of the state and the public administration. All these steps should lead to a reduction in the bureaucracy of the territorial public administration, following the example of the Czech model. Its advantage is that the citizen can handle things in one place and does not have to visit several offices. The aim of the reform is also to provide the mentioned possibility in Slovakia.

The main challenge in the Czech Republic is to defend the combined model of public administration. In these conditions, both self-government and state administration in the delegated competence is performed under the so-called one top of the region (and municipality). Other challenges include the prevention of the other state offices' establishment on the territory. The Supreme Building Authority, for example, is envisioned by the amendment to the Building Act.

In the Czech Republic, a model with a relatively strong position of territorial and local self-government was created after 1989. After that year, there was a gradual tendency of individual governments to nationalize territorial and local governments, limit them, and gain more control over them, at least partially. The heads of the Czech regions think that this tendency is very dangerous or strongly centralist. The chairmen judge this enforced state as abusive for the political goals of the forces that are currently in power. They tend to prefer the diversity, the political colour of the regions, and their competition. The decentralized solution strengthens the stability of the whole state. It is not so easy to abuse the system in the application of decentralization to suppress democracy or limit public control.

Aside from the general challenges, regional challenges can be identified in each region of the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, a similar situation can be observed. For example, in the Karlovy Vary Region, the transformation of the self-administration unit in connection with the slowdown in coal mining is viewed as a challenge. The transformation will relate to the change in the economy, orientation towards new industries, and changes in the educational structure. The withdrawal from coal mining will also trigger changes in the labour market, where it can be expected that other demands will be required from jobseekers, especially regarding higher qualifications than before.

The Slovak and Czech regions have been part of the public administration system for more than 20 years. During this period, they have recognized their competence framework and fulfilled their main task through overall territory development. After 20 years of functioning, it is possible to state that the regional level is the stage whose competence framework is not well known between regional inhabitants. People in individual regions, on the other hand, are more familiar with the highest representative of regional self-government than its competencies.

The regional level has an impact on the daily lives of its inhabitants. Every day, residents interact with its competence framework, whether it is the use of regional roads, suburban bus or regional rail transportation, secondary education, social services provided in social services facilities, the issuance of licenses for outpatient doctors, the provision of health care in regional hospitals, ensuring cultural life, or promoting regional tourism.

Similarities can be found at the regional levels in Slovakia and Czech Republic. We appreciate that the highest representatives of the regions on both sides of the former common border are interested in sharing their experiences, and not just during joint personal meetings. As a result, the chairmen can share their experiences and best practices. The creation of the Transport Infrastructure Fund, the implementation of the legislative initiative for regions, broaden the area of transportation about regional rail transportation, and have regular meetings with the state level, as well as the government, are concrete examples of how the Slovak regions could be inspired by the Czech self-governments. Meetings with representatives from the central stage provide opportunities to solve regional problems more quickly and effectively. However, communication between representatives from the state and regional levels can be complicated in some cases. Its significance stems from the need for direct discussions on solutions that have the potential to improve the lives of people in the regions.

However, sharing the experiences and good example practices is reciprocal. The direct election of the highest representative is the inspiration for the Czech regions, just as the system of dual education in Slovakia, which in its essence follows the system of apprenticeship education. In the dual education system, the Slovak higher territorial units manage to connect theory with practice and effectively prepare young people for the labour market.

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PRIMERJAVA DVAJSETIH LET REGIONALNE SAMOUPRAVE NA ČEŠKEM IN SLOVAŠKEM

Namen članka je primerjati regionalno raven na Slovaškem in Češkem dve desetletji po začetku procesa regionalizacije. Primerjava se osredotoča na izvolitev najvišjega predstavnika ter na trenutni kompetenčni okvir regionalne ravni; članek pa razkriva tudi, katere kompetence vodje slovaških in čeških regij vidijo kot najpomembnejše ter prikazuje primere dobrih praks. Poleg tega v članku primerjamo financiranje regionalnih sistemov na Slovaškem in Češkem, regionalne kompetence v kriznih razmerah ter izzive, s katerimi se soočajo slovaške in češke samoupravne enote. Odgovori na ta izhodišča temeljijo na analizi vprašalnika,

poslanega Združenju samoupravnih regij SK8 in vodjem čeških regij. Po dvajsetih letih so regije stalni del sistema javne uprave in so dokaz, da decentralizacija krepi stabilnost Slovaške in Češke.

Ključne besede: regionalna samouprava; regije; primerjava; predstavniki.