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**PETER JUSKO<sup>1</sup>- LENKA DUCHOŇOVÁ<sup>2</sup>**

## **TERRITORIAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AS AN ENVIRONMENT OF SOCIAL WORK USING A HELPING RELATIONSHIP TO SOLVE THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF INHABITANTS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

### **Abstract**

The territorial self-government environment creates opportunities for social work to intervene in citizens' individual, group, and community social problems, which benefits not only members of local communities but also the territorial self-government. The most effective means of social work intervention for the benefit of residents of territorial self-government is helping relationships. Therefore, we set the goal of our empirical research to identify factors that stimulate clients to solve their social problems within a helping relationship with a social worker in the conditions of a territorial self-government. In the theoretical part of the contribution, we deal with the application of social work in the conditions of territorial self-government in the Slovak Republic, as well as the helping alliance in social work.

**Key words:** territorial self-government, residents of local communities, intervention of social work, helping relationship, factors stimulating clients to solve their social problems

### **INTRODUCTION**

To saturate the diverse needs and interests of residents of local communities, the territorial self-government provides space for the

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1 Department of Social Work, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Faculty of Education, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, [peter.jusko@umb.sk](mailto:peter.jusko@umb.sk), ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1401-035X>.

2 Department of Social Work, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Faculty of Education, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, [lenka.duchonova@student.umb.sk](mailto:lenka.duchonova@student.umb.sk), ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7201-6350>.

implementation of social work, the central goal of which is to professionally intervene in the occurrence or persistence of social events of members of the territorial self-government (including the application of preventive measures) to eliminate or completely remove them. To effectively fulfill the stated goal of this profession, it is necessary to focus attention mainly on the issue of the helping alliance between social workers working in the conditions of territorial self-government and their clients, as the practical performance of social work is primarily based on the use of social contact by helping professionals and the subsequent creation and maintenance of a helping relationship.

## **1 APPLICATION OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE CONDITIONS OF TERRITORIAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

Author Škultéty (2008) defines the territorial, or local self-government, as an organizational form of public administration, in which the community as a legal entity ensures the solution of tasks different from those provided by the state, but the implementation of these tasks is solved under the supervision of the state. Territorial self-government solves tasks established by law on its behalf and under its responsibility and is bound only by laws or legal regulations issued for their implementation (Škultéty, 2008). Another definition is provided by author Trellová (2018), who claims that "currently, local self-government refers in a broader sense to entrusting the management of local affairs to representative bodies of the community that are directly affected by these matters, the functions that they perform on their responsibility, and therefore usually without instructions and orders from higher local authorities. Local self-government as a political and legal institution is created in the form of a municipality as the basic unit of territorial self-government. The basic subject of territorial self-government is the people who live in local communities and their common interests resulting from living together in the same territory" (Trellová, 2018). We are convinced that the transfer of competencies from "superior" bodies to "lower" institutions within the territorial self-government represents a pragmatic solution that benefits not only the higher-ranking public administration bodies but also the residents of the territorial self-government. In our opinion, such a "division" of powers and responsibilities will "relieve" the burden on institutions at a higher level, and at the same time make the management of local problems more effective, since the successful elimination or mitigation of problematic matters requires the involvement of those citizens who are most affected by the problematic situation. Interested citizens can report most authentically about current difficulties and can best assess the seriousness of problems, which is important in finding a solution. We document our opinion with the statement of author Petrušková (2012),

who writes that thanks to the independent decision-making of the territorial self-government on the provision of public goods and services, considering local peculiarities, there is a more effective provision of those services that most correspond to local priorities and preferences (Petrušková, 2012).

According to author Siskovič (2018), the specificity of territorial self-government is that it is characterized by its territory and the state determined by the extent of its competence and the scope of its norms (Siskovič, 2018). Autonomous administration of a certain territory with the state assigned a range of powers is characterized by a high degree of flexibility in addition to the benefits mentioned above.

As part of the decentralization process, there was a territorial-administrative division of the Slovak Republic, and the territorial self-government was divided into the level of the self-governing region and the level of the municipality. Our statement coincides with the statement from the Constitution of the Slovak Republic (1992), where it is stated that "the basis of territorial self-government is the municipality. Territorial self-government consists of a municipality and a higher territorial unit" (Ústava Slovenskej republiky, 1992). These facts are followed by the opinion of author Nižňanský (2005), according to whom "the key instrument of changes in the organization of the state and public administration has become decentralization at all its levels - in political decentralization, in the decentralization of competences and the decentralization of finances. Since 1998, the territorial division of Slovakia has gradually changed and a second level of self-government (higher territorial units) has been created, several hundred competencies have been transferred from the state administration to municipalities and higher territorial units, the financing of territorial self-governments has changed and thus the decision-making autonomy of territorial self-government has been strengthened, as well as control mechanisms in public administration. The implementation of these changes created conditions for a higher degree of citizen participation in public administration, fulfillment of the principle of subsidiarity, strengthening of the position and responsibility of the territorial self-government in providing public services, but also in the development of municipalities, towns, and higher territorial units" (Nižňanský, 2005). We believe that the changes mentioned have an impact on increasing the quality of life of citizens, including through the intensification of their prerequisites to participate in the "management" of public affairs.

Social work is applied in the territorial self-government and its role according to author Schavel et al. (2009) is the decision about social insurance benefits, the decision about state welfare benefits, and the decision about social assistance (Schavel et al., 2009). In this context, author Gejdošová (2012) states that social insurance, state social support, and social assistance

make up the social security system in the Slovak Republic, while these three subsystems differ from each other in terms of the principles on which they are built, the type of covered social events, the method of financing and report (Gejdošová, 2012).

Social work in the conditions of local territorial self-government can also be carried out in the environment of the town office.

The town office is the executive body of the town council and the mayor of the town, while it ensures the administrative and organizational matters of the mayor, the town council, and other established bodies of the town council and performs tasks by the act on the municipal establishment (Mestský úrad, 2024). The town office ensures the written agenda of the town authorities and the authorities of the town council and prepares written versions of the town's decisions (Zákon č. 369/1990 Zb. o obecnom zriadení, 1990).

"Local self-government, as a part of territorial self-government, is an expression of the effort to realize the exercise of competences and fulfill tasks presupposing territorial development, satisfying the needs and interests of citizens who figure as a community defined on the territorial principle, but without the direct influence of the state, whose supervision over the very implementation of tasks by local self-government bodies it is not excluded" (Kováčová, Kováčová, 2022). Following the local territorial self-government, authors Kováčová and Kováčová (2022) identify its four main functions, namely social, territorial-technical, economic, and coordination functions (Kováčová, Kováčová, 2022). In our opinion, the social work carried out in the territorial self-government is most connected with the social function of the local territorial self-government. We are based on the statement of author Kováčová (2011), who writes that the social function of local territorial self-government is, due to decentralization processes, characterized by the transfer of competencies in the social field to local self-government, which, in addition to the safety of citizens and the protection of their property, also includes the provision of social care and social services, as well as the elimination of social injustice in income distribution (Kováčová, 2011 In: Kováčová, Kováčová, 2022). Social care and social services are the domain of social work, which points to the mutual connections between the social function of local territorial self-government and the profession of social work.

## 1.1 Helping relationships in social work

Social work is characterized as the direct, intentional, and prepared contact of a social worker with a client, group, or community to establish a social diagnosis and carry out social therapy (Oláh et al., 2008). According to author Levická (2007), the goal of social work is to eliminate or alleviate

psychological, social, economic, and cultural distress by providing professional help to the client in discovering his resources and potential, as well as by looking for sources of help outside of his personality (Levická et al., 2007). We believe that to achieve the given goal of social work as a practical activity, the most effective "tool" is the influence of social workers on clients through a helping relationship. Our position coincides with the statement of author Biestek (1957), who claims that the relationship represents the most essential component in working with the client and perceives the helping alliance as "a dynamic interaction of attitudes and emotions between the social worker and the client to help achieve a better adjustment between him and his environment" (Biestek, 1957 In: Brnula, 2013). The mentioned author also proposes the principles of the relationship between the social worker and the client: individualization; expressing feelings (purposeful expression of feelings); controlled emotional involvement; acceptance (acceptance); non-critical non-evaluative attitude; self-determination and discretion (Biestek, 1957 In: Brnula, 2013). Social workers should let clients know that they observe all the mentioned principles of the helping alliance and that they are also internally identified with the given principles, because thanks to such a way of professional behavior, the probability of building a high-quality and trust-based helping relationship with clients increases, which will subsequently be reflected in more effective provision of professional help. A helping relationship must contain two components, namely help and power. Without these elements, it could not fall into the category of a professional relationship.

Author Úlehla (2007) defines help as an agreed method of joint work that the client wishes (Úlehla, 2007). In the process of helping, it helps that one person provides help to another person or a group of people, and it can be financial, material, or psychological help. It follows that the process of helping is a certain type of social intervention that has its subjects, content, and goals. Social intervention, as a dynamic process of exchanging information or providing and receiving help, takes place inside the interaction of the helping worker with the client, but also outside it. There are defined rules for the roles of expert and service user. In addition, the social context in which the helping process takes place shapes its entire course (Buryová, Krakowczyková, 2017). Author Hangoni (2009) considers helping to be a characteristic feature of the relationship between a social worker and a client, and thus their relationship should also have elements of a helping relationship characterized by advice (counseling), guidance, accompaniment, and therapy. The mentioned author further writes that offering help to social workers should be carried out in the form of cooperation within the framework of an equal relationship with the client (Hangoni, 2009 In: Ondrušová et al., 2009).

Power as a necessary component of a helping alliance is characterized by author Matoušek (2003) as the exercise of direct influence on people's behavior, or on their beliefs (Matoušek, 2003, In: Balogová, Žiaková, 2017). Author Kopřiva (2000) considers power to be very important even in helping and claims that the client is to a certain extent powerless by the fact that he needs something, and the worker is to a certain extent powerful by helping (or at least promising to help) so that the less powerful the client was a bit more powerful. In addition, the power of the worker can be defined by legal regulations, organizational rules, and unwritten customs of the institution, unwritten norms valid throughout the company, or it can arise within the individual worker-client relationship, either on the initiative of the helper or rather on the initiative of the client (Kopřiva, 2000). In our opinion, the unequal position of the social worker and the client is beneficial, because the nature of helping relationships requires the professional to have a wider range of powers. This allows him to manage the process of assistance, and determine the rules of the relationship, but also to control the client, which, in the case of an adequately chosen approach, facilitates the achievement of the goals of the helping alliance.

Power is associated with the authority of an expert. Author Borská et al. (2019) in this context state that through the authority attributed to the social worker by the client, it is possible to achieve a high-quality relationship between them, which is subsequently reflected in more effective intervention and makes it possible to support the client's abilities, pursue his own goals, but can also limit him (Borská et al., 2019). This statement is supported by a quote from author Hutyrová (2013), who writes that "the power position of the worker strongly influences the possibilities and method of assisting. The greater the authority the helper has, the greater the tendency of his counterpart to distance and mistrust" (Hutyrová, 2013).

"The power we are dealing with is applied within a relationship and is directed towards a certain goal. Social workers exercising power try to achieve power goals in certain ways, for which they use various means. It is essential that they can justify such behavior to themselves and their surroundings, and therefore it is necessary to legitimize it" (Mitas, Vasilenko, 2019). The legitimization of certain behaviors of helping professionals contributes to its application in practice and prevents its sanctioning, so it is a socially approved "consent" to behavior meeting certain conditions that explain such behavior as ethically correct.

In the framework of the comparison of help and power, author Musil (2004) emphasizes that help is associated with care, support, dialogue, and a symmetrical relationship between the social worker and the client, while their opposite related to power is control, authority, monologue and unilateral

influencing of the client by social workers (Musil, 2004 In: Mitas, Vasilenko, 2019). Social workers should apply help and power based on the client's personality and social situation so that social work clients perceive their participation in a helping relationship as justified. An indicator of considered "handling" of help and power can be the willingness of users of social services to continue cooperating with the expert and at the same time not feeling an excessive amount of help or power.

## 2 METHODS

Considering the focus of our qualitative research, we chose a phenomenological research design, the goal of which was to identify factors that stimulate clients to solve their social problems within the framework of a helping relationship with a social worker in the conditions of territorial self-government. Based on the research goal formulated in this way, it was possible to find out what motives motivate clients to cooperate with a social worker operating in the conditions of territorial self-government.

Based on the attributes mentioned in the research, we set the research question as follows: "What factors of the helping relationship between the social worker and the client in the conditions of territorial self-government most influence the motivation of clients to cooperate with the social worker?"

For data collection, we used an in-depth semi-structured interview, which was carried out in the form of an individual interview, and at the same time, it was a direct interview. The research interview was attended by three female participants working as social workers in the conditions of territorial self-government, specifically, they were employed at the city office, where they had the opportunity to create a helping relationship with a diverse clientele of social workers to provide professional assistance.

Following the verbatim transcription, we performed an open coding technique, in which we assigned the created codes to individual categories according to their common features but also based on the differences between the codes.

## 3 RESULTS

In this part, we present research findings focused on the topic of factors stimulating clients to solve their social problems within the framework of helping relationships with a social worker in the conditions of territorial self-government.

### **3.1 Factors stimulating clients to solve their social problems within the framework of helping relationships with a social worker in the conditions of territorial self-government**

This subchapter consists of three categories related to the motivation of clients to solve their social problems with a social worker through a helping relationship. We established the given categories based on whether the clients' motivation to cooperate with a social worker in a helping relationship is based on the individual needs of users of social services, whether it results from the process of providing help to social workers, or whether it stems from the client's social environment.

#### **3.1.1 Clients' motivation to solve their social problems within a helpful relationship with a social worker results from the individual needs of users of social services**

This area of motivation of clients to cooperate with a social worker was strengthened by the clients' motivation to solve their social problems within a helping relationship with a social worker resulting from the individual needs of users of social services awareness of the need for long-term cooperation with a social worker, as clients needed to understand that a one-time meeting will not solve their problems because it is a long-term process of providing help. Another individual motivating factor stimulating the cooperation of clients with a social worker was the clients' right to self-determination, as stated by Participant 2: "...we don't even specify what we will specifically help them with, it is rather up to them in which area of life they would like to help, whether in the area of housing, health, social security." It is clear from the statement that the participants understood the client's right to self-determination as the authority of users of social services to decide on what they want the help of a social worker. The clients' right to self-determination is also related to the client's ability to decide on the degree of cooperation with the social worker and the client's ability to decide on the degree of their openness towards the social worker, as pointed out by Participant 2: "...it is actually up to them, to what extent they will let us in cooperation, as open as they are." We concluded that the most frequent personal motivation of users of social services to cooperate with a social worker was the clients' inability to solve their problematic situation, the clients' lack of self-confidence to cooperate with institutions, and the clients' low level of expressive skills. Participant 2 described these aspects: "Well, their motivation actually stems from some of the problems that they need to solve, and they don't actually know the way, or maybe they know the way, but they don't know the possibilities of solving that

problem." Or maybe they lack the courage to visit the institution, maybe they feel that they don't know how to express themselves and need a third party, someone who would communicate it for them or who might find out more options and be able to advise them on what would be best, it's so individual for everyone, that what leads them to it." By the clients' inability to solve their problematic situation, the participant meant ignorance of ways or alternatives to solve the clients' social events. In the context of the lack of self-confidence of clients for cooperation with institutions and the low level of expressive abilities of clients, there was an obvious need for users of social services to interest a social worker as a mediator of communication with institutions. The need for clients to be informed related to the lack of awareness of their entitlements was another aspect and primarily concerned the clients' efforts to find out whether they are authorized to acquire finance due to belonging to some target group, for example, in benefit increases. According to Participant 2, the clients' fear of sanctions resulting from not solving their problem situation was the factor most influencing the clients' motivation to cooperate with a social worker, when it concerned fear of fines, misdemeanors, or debts and executions, but also of starting to serve a prison sentence. This is how Participant 2 reported about it: "...preventing any sanctions that would result if they don't solve the situation that needs to be solved at the moment, so probably the same, the same fear of fines or some offenses, some debts, executions or the beginning of serving the sentence, simply to prevent a situation and try to solve it this way." In addition, participant 3 noted that clients tend to expect cooperation with a social worker that the social worker will solve everything and that the clients thus get rid of their responsibility. Based on the participant's statement, we determined the other individual factors motivating clients to cooperate with a social worker, a wrong idea of clients about solving their problem situation by a social worker, as well as unrealistic expectations of clients about transferring responsibility to a social worker.

### **3.1.2 Clients' motivation to solve their social problems within a helping relationship with a social worker resulting from the process of assisting the social workers**

To ensure the effectiveness of the process of assisting, the social worker should have the ability to set achievable goals for clients, therefore he was required to correctly estimate the abilities and possibilities of clients to achieve the goals, as indicated by Participant 1: "...be able to estimate that according to their abilities, the possibility of not giving such a plan or such procedures that the client is not capable of, hey, for example, enabling or working, simply setting such goals that can be realized according to what the

person is like." At the same time, the social worker should have the ability to correctly evaluate the client's problem and, with the help of this data, can select the most serious one that requires primary attention when several problems occur. Another important factor in motivating clients to cooperate with a social worker was the correct timing of obtaining information from clients within the process of providing professional help, as the sequence of individual steps was essential in obtaining data, while the social worker cannot force users of social services to provide information against their will. Participant 1 explained it this way: "...we are trying to get the medical history and the information as much as possible, but not immediately, I say, because again we cannot force the client, so we do it step by step." No less important was the correct choice of methods in the process of providing help to social workers. In this connection, the participant preferred the interview method, through which she reveals the essence of the client's problems and what form of help the clients need. Participant 3 considered the social workers' focus on finding out the causes of the clients' problems to be the aspect of the helping alliance that most influences the clients' motivation to cooperate with the social worker, and in this context, she stated: "...understanding why, that's where it's important, why it happened that way." Participant 2 perceived the optimism of the social worker as a factor related to the way the social worker behaves, which through his positive influence on the client "stimulates" his faith in the resolution of the social event: "...maybe even so optimistic that being so optimistic that they still believed in the fact that it could be fixed somehow."

### **3.1.3 Clients' motivation to solve their social problems within a helping relationship with a social worker resulting from the clients' social environment**

We found out that the social environment of the clients meant for the users of social services the motivation to cooperate with the social worker, from two perspectives. The first aspect of motivation was the positive opinion of the social environment on the help provided by the social worker, and the second factor was the stimulation of the clients by the social environment to seek the professional help of the social worker, as a result of which the social environment addressed recommendations to the clients to visit the social worker with a request for professional help. as participant 1 summed it up: "...for example, we have recommendations, I think they will receive from those in the neighborhood that they will go, they will help you there to provide help, those recommendations I think are also important."

## 4 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we analyze and scientifically interpret the research findings, which we confront with the professional literature, and at the same time present our own evaluation opinions.

Clients' awareness of the need for long-term cooperation with a social worker constituted a motivation for cooperation with a social worker, which resulted from the individual needs of users of social services. This awareness of the clients played a significant role in the continuation of the helping relationship because the users of social work services realized that they needed the help of a social worker for their intentions. Clients who were aware of the necessity of long-term cooperation with a social worker possessed certain positive qualities, such as persistence, determination, motivation, and awareness. Such clients were able to correctly evaluate their situation in the sense that they were aware of their limits and the overall seriousness of the social situation, as they sought out a social worker for help.

Another individual motivational factor stimulating clients to cooperate with a social worker was the clients' right to self-determination. As author Barker (2003) states, the right to self-determination recognizes the needs of users of social services to freely make their own decisions and choices (Barker, 2003 In: Mátel, 2015). In the opinion of author Mališková (2013), social workers should respect and support the human right to make their own choices and decisions independently of their values and life decisions, if this does not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others (Mališková, 2013). Respecting the right to self-determination and client autonomy is an ethical principle of social work (Matulayová, 2011 In: Aadland, Matulayová, 2011). "However, the right to self-determination is not absolute in practice. There are cases when it is limited by the client's reduced ability to make rational decisions (e.g. in cases of certain mental illnesses, in the case of drug addicts), in cases of violation of the rights of others or legal regulations, further in the case of self-harm, in cases of people deprived of legal capacity, in minor children and the like. Even in such cases, however, it is necessary to strive for the greatest possible degree of client autonomy within realistic possibilities" (Mátel, 2010). The clients' right to self-determination also refers to the clients' possibility to decide on the degree of cooperation with the social worker and the clients' possibility to decide on the degree of their openness towards the social worker, which users of social services may consider a certain "privilege," which will allow them to determine an adequate degree of cooperation from their point of view and openness in the helping relationship so that in the helping alliance they do not have to worry about being sanctioned by the social worker for "non-cooperation" or for not providing certain data.

Within their individual needs, service users are motivated to cooperate with a social worker due to their inability to solve their problematic situation. As author Levická (2002) writes, it is characteristic of the client that he is not able to solve the conflict situation in which he found himself by his forces and means, that is, in addition to the existence of a socially problematic situation, the inability or current inability to solve this situation by his forces must also be obvious (Levická, 2002). "The cause of "failure," or the inability to find a solution to a problem situation, is usually a sudden, unexpected change in social reality (unemployment, epidemic, natural disaster, etc.), which the individual does not expect, therefore he is not prepared for it" (Levická, 2003).

The lack of self-confidence of clients in cooperation with institutions was an individual motivation for using the services of a social worker. The low self-confidence of service users could create a "block" for the implementation of independent cooperation with competent institutions, therefore clients turned into social workers, assuming that they would mediate help from institutions. This was related to the low level of the clients' expressive abilities, i.e. their subjective feelings about their insufficient ability to express themselves, based on which the clients needed a social worker as a "third side" who would communicate various issues for them, find out more options for help and be able to advise them on the best alternative solution. It follows from the data that clients who had low self-confidence in cooperation with institutions and who, according to their belief, did not reach the desired level of communication skills perceived the social worker as an intermediary of help and as someone who, if necessary, would involve various sources of help (for example, institutions). By the fact that the social worker cooperates with various institutions and experts from other helping professions, the interest and motivation of clients to be a part of the helping relationship also increases, as they realize the fact that more subjects are involved in the process of providing help, the more effective the help will be.

The need for clients to be informed related to insufficient awareness of their rights as a factor significantly influencing the motivation of service users to cooperate with a social worker, manifested itself in the form of clients' efforts to find out whether they are entitled to claim their rights, for example when receiving social benefits or as part of social assistance. Lack of awareness of one's claims causes uncertainty in clients and the need to learn more true information on the given issue. This motivates them to contact a social worker, who in the helping alliance, among other things, will also provide them with relevant information about their claims. The authority of the social worker given by his affiliation to the organization causes the clients to perceive the information provided by the social worker as more credible and more in line with the current legislative provisions.

When it comes to clients' fear of sanctions resulting from not solving their problem situation, as an individual motivational aspect, it was mainly fear of financial sanctions, such as fines and executions, but it also included sanctions in the form of imprisonment. The clients cooperated with the social workers to avoid any sanctions that would threaten them due to not solving their socially problematic situation. In connection with this fact, author Ondrejkovič (2001) states that, from a sociological point of view, sanctions can only have the meaning that an individual who has deviated from the norm will not commit such actions in the future. The essential function of sanctioning therefore lies in its signaling, warning, and preventive effect. From the point of view of the nature of social control, it is important what the actual behavior of the individual will be in the future. Sociologically, non-compliance with behavioral norms is most often justified by insufficient socialization (Ondrejkovič, 2001). Users of social work services, who were afraid of sanctions for not solving their problem situation, tended to behave in a compliant manner. At the same time, they had a certain degree of self-control. According to the sociological dictionary (2007), self-control refers to the observance of social norms, patterns of behavior, and recognition of social values even without coercion (Sociologický slovník, 2007).

The motivation for cooperation with a social worker, resulting from the individual needs of service users, was the clients' wrong idea of the social worker solving their problem situation, as well as the clients' unrealistic expectations about the transfer of responsibility to the social worker. It was a distorted understanding of the goal of social work as a profession and the work of a social worker on the part of clients, because a social worker should not "solve" the social situation for the users of social work services, nor "take" responsibility for the clients' problems. Instead, in the interest of preventing these phenomena, according to author Levická (2020), to identify the client's idea of future cooperation, the social worker can use various communication techniques and contractual agreements, thereby contributing to building an effective helping relationship, as it is beneficial if already at the initial stage to clarify the roles that both play and when the social worker carries out a negotiation process focused on mutual expectations from future cooperation, based on which the to build a cooperation agreement, or agreement on services (Levická, 2020). As authors Ballew and Mink (1996) write, the service agreement is a formal expression of understanding about the nature of joint work, explaining that some problems between the client and the social worker can be classified as role problems, that is, as misunderstandings in role expectations, which can arise with the client and with the social worker. The mentioned authors further state that this type of misunderstanding can be prevented if both are involved in the process of clarifying the tasks at the very

beginning (Ballew, Mink, 1996 In: Levická, 2020).

The clients' motivation to cooperate with the social worker could also result from the process of providing help to the social worker due to their ability to set achievable goals for the clients. If the social worker is not able to set realistic goals for service users in terms of their capabilities, clients would lose motivation to strive for their fulfillment in the case of very demanding goals and could subsequently end the helping relationship with the social worker. According to our opinion, it is appropriate to determine several sub-goals together with the clients, by which it is possible to work towards the desired result. It is about "decomposing" the main goal into smaller goals, the achievement of which strengthens clients' self-confidence in their abilities to solve their problems independently. Through this, the client's cooperation with the social worker in a helping alliance leads to the fulfillment of the goal of social work as a practical activity, which is help for self-help. „In the 70s of the last century, alongside the term social functioning, the term help for self-help appeared again, which was considered one of the goals of modern social work for a relatively long time. The term was used to denote the process of empowering the client, based on understanding and correct evaluation of the situation in which the client finds himself. It also includes the search and discovery of individual reserves and social resources, based on which it is possible to reach the desired goals. Help for self-help is based on the learning process, through which the individual acquires the necessary social skills" (Levická et al., 2016).

The ability to correctly evaluate the client's problem was an important part of the social worker's professional "equipment" and enabled him to identify the client's main problem, which was necessary to solve first in the current situation. The ability to properly assess the client's problem is thus related to the correct assessment of the "urgency" of individual problems of the user of social services and the determination of the "order" in which the client will work together with the social worker to eliminate the problems, or to eliminate their negative effects on the client and his social environment.

The correct timing of obtaining information from clients was related to choosing a favorable opportunity to ask service users for data necessary for the process of providing professional assistance to social workers. The social worker should respect the principle of the clients' free decision not to provide certain information.

According to author Jusko (2010), the correct choice of methods in the process of providing help to the social worker can be influenced by different input characteristics of clients, which includes age as one of the basic differentiating features of social work in general, but also the state of health and the social environment in which the social worker's clients they find. The

given author further states that if the goal of social work as a profession is to help the client solve an existing social problem, then the choice of social work methods should significantly correspond to the target state of a positive solution to the social problem (if, for example, the client's social problem is poverty and a positive shift in the solution his material need, the applied methods of social work should aim at measurably achieving this goal) (Jusko, 2010 In: Hudecová et al., 2010).

The social worker's focus on finding out the causes of the clients' problems manifested itself as the social worker's effort to penetrate the "core" of the clients' social events and "reveal" those facts that are fundamentally involved in the creation and persistence of the social situation. The social worker's concentration on finding out the causes of service users' problems was a positive element of the helping relationship, which signals the social worker's efforts to eliminate the social event, that is, not only to mitigate its undesirable effects. This approach of the social worker makes it possible not to prolong the client's "dependence" on the provision of professional help.

The social worker's optimism supported the clients' motivation to cooperate by strengthening their belief in the possibility of solving the social problem. According to author Levická (2007), the optimism of a social worker means that, despite the realistic perception of the situation, the social worker has enough faith in the client's potential and the possibility of positive change (Levická et al., 2007). As part of research that emphasizes the importance of social worker optimism in helping relationships with clients, we present a longitudinal study by authors Kirk and Koeske (1995), in which it was found that social workers working with users of social work services in the field of mental health had better access to their work if they were optimistic rather than "realistic" (Kirk, Koeske, 1995 In: Collins, 2008). On the other hand, social workers may direct their efforts towards unattainable goals due to "excessive" optimism (Collins, 2008).

The motivation of users of social services to cooperate with a social worker resulting from the social environment consisted in the positive opinion of the social environment on the help provided by the social worker and in the stimulation of the clients by the social environment to seek the professional help of the social worker. With the factor of positive opinion of the social environment on the help provided by social workers, we consider it important to distinguish between the term social environment and the social environment. Author Payne (2005) understands the environment as a narrower environment, i.e. the environment directly surrounding the client, while he defines the environment as wider, i.e. the one in which he lives, but which is not affected by his personal and direct ties (Payne, 2005 In: Brnula, 2019a). The social environment and its positive opinion of the social workers'

services can "fix" the client in seeking the help of a helping professional. In addition, the positive attitude of the social environment meant the absence of stigmatization of the client due to his need for professional help. The aspect of stimulating clients from the social environment to seek the professional help of a social worker can be understood as a direct encouragement of clients to start using the services of a social worker to solve a problem situation. For both factors, it was about motivating the clients to cooperate with the social workers through external factors.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of our research was to identify factors that stimulate clients to solve their social problems within the framework of helping relationships with a social worker in the conditions of territorial self-government. We divided the findings into three categories according to whether the clients' motivation to cooperate in a helping relationship with a social worker is based on the individual needs of users of social services, whether it results from the process of providing help to social workers, or whether it stems from the client's social environment.

Client's motivation to cooperate within a helping relationship with a social worker resulting from the individual needs of users of social services was related to the client's awareness of the need for long-term cooperation with a social worker, to the client's right to self-determination, to the client's inability to solve their problematic situation, to the lack of self-confidence of the clients to cooperation with institutions, to the low level of clients' expressive abilities, to the need for client information related to insufficient awareness of their claims and to client's fear of sanctions resulting from not solving their problem situation.

Clients' motivation to cooperate within a helping relationship with a social worker results from the process of assisting social workers as another category consists of the social worker's ability to set achievable goals for clients and the ability to correctly evaluate the client's problem, in the correct choice of methods in the process of assisting social workers, in the social worker's focus on identifying the causes of client's problems and the social worker's optimism.

The last category consisted of the clients' motivation to cooperate with the social worker resulting from the clients' social environment, which was related to the positive opinion of the social environment on the help provided by the social worker and to the stimulation of the clients by the social environment to seek the professional help of the social worker.

Social workers should "stimulate" clients' interest in being part

of a helping alliance and actively participate in solving their own socially problematic situation so that users of social work services perceive themselves as the "most important" actors in eliminating their social events or mitigating their negative impacts. Such action of social workers on clients supports not only the correct approach of members of local communities to the solution of current or potential social problems but also leads to the fulfillment of the main idea of the social work profession, which is "help for self-help." We believe that through the mentioned method of action of the helping experts, it is possible to significantly reduce the risk of accumulation of social problems of the residents of the territorial self-government

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**LEILA MOHAMMED EL HADJ<sup>1</sup> - AMINE SABA<sup>2</sup> - ARIDJE REGUIA MAHMOUDI<sup>3</sup> - BOUCHETARA MAHDI<sup>4</sup>**

## **OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: ANALYZING STRATEGIES OF THE ALGERIAN ACCOUNTING REFORM: CASE STUDY THE MINISTRY OF FINANCES**

### **Abstract**

Algeria is undergoing an accounting reform initiative to transition from cash accounting to accrual accounting, to enhance transparency and accountability in state financial reporting. However, this transition presents challenges and potential resistance to change. This research aims to investigate effective strategies for managing resistance to change during the implementation of accounting reforms in the Algerian context. Using a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews with key reform actors, the study examines change management, resistance to change, the impact of resistance, and effective strategies. The results of the study show that a lack of familiarity with the new accounting information systems and the incompetence of those involved in credit management have slowed down the success of the accounting system modernization

**Key words:** Accounting reform, resistance to change, accountability, Algeria, transparency

### **INTRODUCTION**

The need to reform the state has become imperative to ensure effective governance, increased transparency, and efficient public administration.

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1 Higher National School of Management, Algeria, The Laboratory of Managerial Innovation, Governance, and Entrepreneurship – LIMGE, l.mohammedelhadj@ensmanagement.edu.dz, ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4528-4196>.

2 Higher National School of Management, Algeria, The Laboratory of Managerial Innovation, Governance, and Entrepreneurship – LIMGE, a.saba@ensmanagement.edu.dz, ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-2146-3109>.

3 Higher National School of Management, Algeria, The Laboratory of Managerial Innovation, Governance, and Entrepreneurship – LIMGE, a.mahmoudi@ensmanagement.edu.dz.

4 Higher National School of Management, Algeria, The Laboratory of Managerial Innovation, Governance, and Entrepreneurship – LIMGE, m.bouchetara@ensmanagement.edu.dz, ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9826-8985>.

Recognizing these challenges, the government has embarked on a process of state modernization, particularly in the realm of accounting. With this aim in mind, the Algerian Ministry of Finance has undertaken a major accounting reform project, transitioning from cash-based accounting to accrual accounting by IPSAS standards. This transition reflects two primary reasons justifying the reform of the accounting framework of Algerian public institutions. Firstly, there is a necessity to enhance public management. Before the adoption of the LOLF, state accounting was characterized by excessive aggregation and only provided centralized annual information, hindering its utility for various services. This reform aimed to establish a more efficient public management tool tailored to the needs of administrators. Secondly, the emergence of financial scandals within Algerian public institutions in the early 2000s has heightened the need for reform in public accounting practices (Lande, Rocher, 2011).

Furthermore, each state must adhere to precise accounting standards, including international and European norms, as well as standards established by the state itself, underscoring the importance of this transition for Algeria.

Thus, the research question that arises is: How to effectively manage resistance to change in the context of Algeria's accounting reform? The following interrogations have been generated to facilitate the framing and refinement of the study: What are the most effective strategies for managing resistance to change during the implementation of accounting reforms in Algeria? What are the implications of effective resistance management strategies for the success of accounting reform implementation in Algeria?

This study aims to investigate effective resistance management during accounting reforms in Algeria. Transitioning from cash to accrual accounting aims to enhance transparency and accountability in state financial reporting but faces challenges. Objectives include identifying strengths and challenges in change management, exploring improvement areas, analyzing factors contributing to resistance, assessing resistance's impact on reform success, and recommending effective strategies for managing resistance in the Algerian context.

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring Resistance to Change in Organizational Reforms: Factors and Implications. In their studies, (Reginato, Fadda, Paglietti, 2016) and (Tran, Pham, Bui, 2020) investigated resistance factors in public management reforms and Lean Transformation. Parochial self-interest and low tolerance affected implementation. Large entities showed higher resistance, especially in organizational culture and rigidity. Considering organizational culture and leadership style, adequate information, training, and employee involvement reduced resistance. Trust in management and timely information also lowered

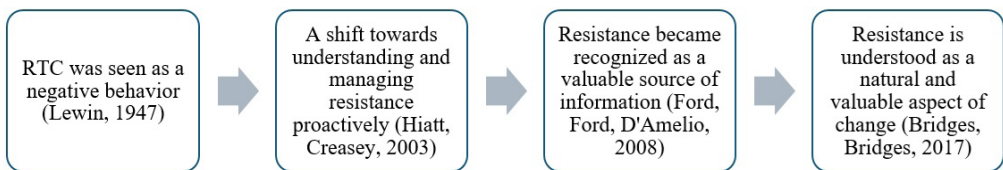
opposing behaviors, highlighting the importance of addressing contextual factors in managing resistance during reform implementation.

Understanding Employees' Reactions to Organizational Change: Forms of Resistance. In their studies, (Paulikas, Paulikiene, 2022) and (Hadeef, Boughari, 2022) found that effective communication reduces employee resistance to change. Well-informed employees are more likely to support changes, foster involvement, and reduce resistance. Individual variables like gender, age, marital status, educational level, and experience influence resistance in both public and private institutions. Implicit resistance due to fear of the unknown and loss of power is common, highlighting the importance of employee involvement in decision-making to address resistance effectively. Understanding specific forms of resistance in different settings leads to more effective change management strategies.

The Negative and Positive Studies by (Elgoahry, Abdelazyz, 2020) and (Boyer, 2017) highlight the impact of resistance to change. The former shows negative effects on e-government implementation in Egypt, necessitating strategies for improved efficiency. The latter reveals the potential for positive outcomes during radical organizational changes, such as learning, new opportunities, and employee motivation.

Managing Resistance to Change: Strategies and Best Practices (Karaxha, 2019) and (Kuzhda, 2016) studies identified methods for dealing with resistance to change: communication, support, participation, negotiation, manipulation, and compulsion. Effective communication, support, and participation are crucial, while weak support, lack of resources, and poor communication act as barriers. The support method is recommended. Both studies highlight the multifaceted approach, involving top executives and considering individual traits for successful change management.

### Scheme 1. Overview of the conceptual progression of Resistance to Change



Source: Authors.

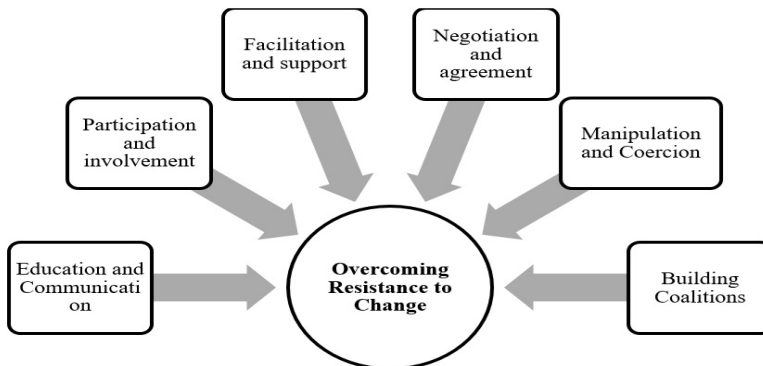
## 2 THE UNDERLYING FACTORS OF RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

**Individual-Level Factors:** Early theories on resistance to change (RTC) in organizations emerged in the mid-20th century, focusing on individuals' psychological and behavioral responses to change. These theories emphasize individual-level factors contributing to resistance and the importance of addressing them for successful change implementation. (Kotter, Schlesinger, 1989) Identified four primary reasons for change resistance: parochial self-interest, lack of understanding and trust, differing perspectives and goals, and low tolerance for change. Addressing these reasons is essential for effective resistance management.

Organizational factors contributing to resistance to change include structural inertia, ineffective communication, lack of leadership support, insufficient resources, change management capability, organizational culture, and power dynamics (Ford, Ford, D'Amelio, 2008; Hannan, Freeman, 1984; Kotter, 1996; Nohria, Beer, 2000; Kotter, 2014; Schein, Schein, 2016; Anderson, 2019). These factors can hinder successful change implementation by impacting employees' attitudes and behaviors toward the proposed changes.

Forms of resistance to change are Active Resistance to Change and Passive Resistance to Change. Active Resistance to Change: Involves direct opposition with visible complaints, protests, and threats of job actions or strikes. Three forms: aggression (attacks on implementers), covert sabotage (hidden actions like spreading rumors), and overt sabotage (visible actions to disrupt change implementation) (Sayers, Smollan, 2009). Passive Resistance to Change: Passive RTC occurs subtly, without overt opposition. Forms include non-compliance (discomfort with imposed change), apathy (lack of interest), and avoidance (stepping away from change-related activities) (Bridges, Bridges, 2017).

Scheme 2. Overcoming resistance to change: a strategic approach



Source: Kotter, Schlesinger, 1989.

The term "reform" refers to a process of change, altering structures and behaviors to improve outcomes in the state (Schick, 1998). Modernization involves continuous adaptation to meet new challenges and improve state functioning (Farazmand, 2002). The Algerian financial reform program aims to modernize public finances, adopting performance-based budgeting and New Public Management principles (Khechaimia, 2022; Cheurfa, 2022). This program emphasizes budget transparency, accrual accounting, multi-year budgetary management, and a focus on public performance to enhance accountability and decision-making. These dimensions represent critical areas of focus for organizations aiming to improve financial management practices (Cheurfa, 2022).

Algeria is transitioning from cash accounting to accrual accounting, based on IPSAS, to enhance financial transparency and accountability (OECD, 2001; Abdous, 2018). This reform involves three dimensions: cash accounting for budget implementation, accrual-based accounting for financial position, and cost analysis accounting (Cheurfa, 2016). An institutional twinning with the French General Directorate of Public Finance (DGFIP) supports capacity building and the design of the accrual accounting system. The success of these reforms requires broader public management reforms and the promotion of new information for decision-making (OECD, 2003). Therefore, the transition's specifics vary based on country contexts and capacities (CFRR, 2021).

The Algerian Government has undertaken a vast budget reform project to improve strategic choices, strengthen accountability, enhance transparency, and control public expenditure (Khechaimia, 2022). This reform has been achieved through the enactment of the new LOLF financial constitution, Law 23 07 of 21 June 2023, concerning public accounting rules and financial management, the implementation of Results-Based Management (RBM), Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), program-based budgeting, and new budget classifications. The budget cycle and finance bill are also restructured to ensure efficient budget development and execution (LOLF, 2018). However, Despite the efforts made to implement this reform, delays persist due to the absence of publication of the accompanying application texts, as well as the shortage of appropriate training programs aimed at educating individuals involved in appropriation management, particularly program managers, public accountants, budget controllers (Saba, 2020; OECD, 2014).

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research on resistance to change centers around the idea that social reality is subjective and shaped by individuals. To explore this, we use a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, embracing a constructivist epistemology. This allows us to focus on the subjective aspects of resistance to change within the Ministry of Finance.

### **Methods of data collection**

Data collection involved two phases:

Phase 1 used qualitative methods like observations, discussions, meetings, and focus groups to gain insight into ongoing reforms and stakeholder perspectives.

Phase 2 conducted semi-structured interviews to further explore resistance to change, covering various aspects related to the reform efforts.

### **Interviewees and Sampling**

We selected individuals actively involved in implementing the reform and managing resistance for our qualitative research. With a sample size of five participants, our aim was an in-depth understanding rather than generalization. Although convenience sampling was used for efficient access, we acknowledged its limitations and addressed potential bias by maximizing participant diversity and considering research design limitations.

### **Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations**

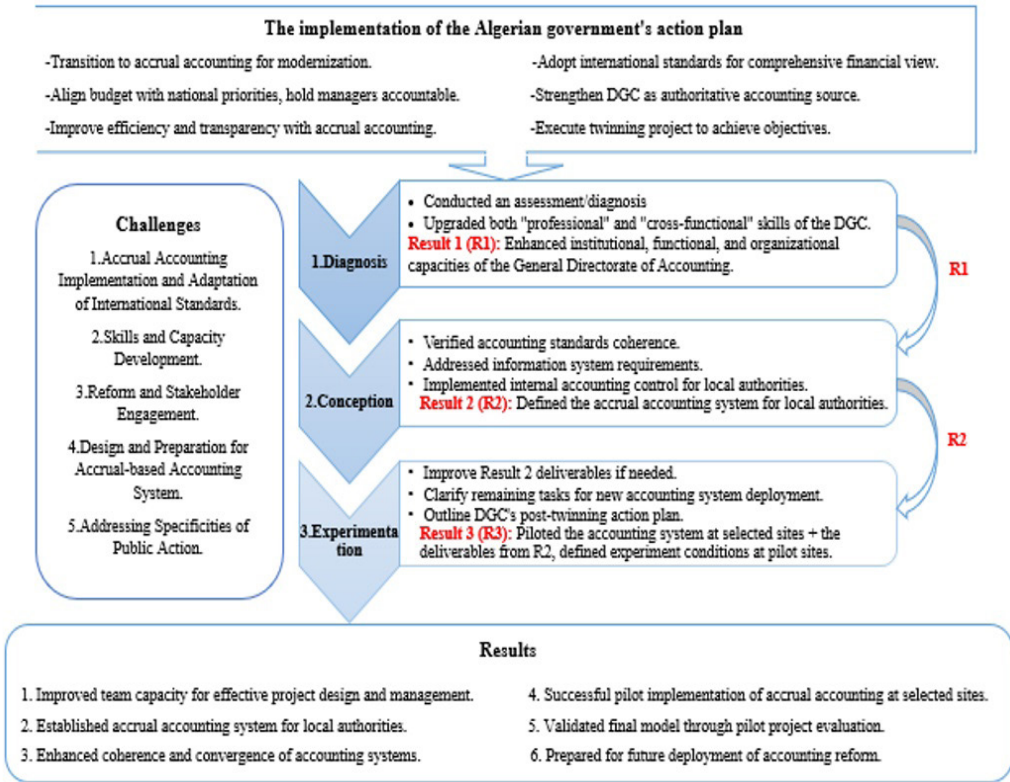
Data analysis techniques, including content analysis and thematic analysis using the framework method, were employed to interpret the data and identify patterns and themes related to the research questions. The analysis was facilitated using NVIVO 10, a data analysis tool, that ensures rigor, transparency, and reliability in the research. Ethical considerations prioritized participants' well-being, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, data ownership, and the right to withdraw without consequence.

## **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Through diverse methods such as observations, document analysis, meetings, and focus groups, we collected data from multiple perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the accounting reform project. Observations provided firsthand insights into the project's implementation and practical aspects. Analyzing relevant documents offered valuable context, objectives, and challenges. Attending meetings allowed us to engage with stakeholders, comprehend decision-making processes, and uncover motivations. Organizing focus groups captured a range of viewpoints, unveiling hidden challenges and emerging themes.

These methods facilitated the compilation of a comprehensive presentation of the reform project, incorporating insights from various sources and enhancing the validity of our findings. As a result, we have developed a depiction of the reform in action, as presented below:

Scheme 3. The implementation of the Algerian government’s action plan



Source: Authors.

The accounting reform project is divided into several parts:

Phase 1: Assessment and diagnosis

Carrying out a diagnosis to evaluate current reality and the human and technical resources.

Phase 2: Conception

The second stage, known as the conception stage, aimed to conceive:

- An accrual accounting system.
- An information system to accompany the implementation of the new accounting system on pilot sites.

Phase 3: Experimentation

The third and final stage, called experimentation, consisted of actions to ensure the successful implementation of the accrual accounting system.

To this end, several meetings were organized to raise awareness among the agents of the pilot site and the services of the authorizing officer (executives of the Ministry of the Interior, the P/APC, and their executives). Algerian and French experts were also involved in supporting the pilot site in the implementation of accrual accounting, and the site was provided with all the necessary resources.

DGTGCOFE officials have completed the experiment and a seminar on change management has been held. In addition to the training of Algerian managers in France on the French experimentation of accrual accounting during the twinning, training on accrual accounting and adult education was provided to 60 managers who were to become future trainers. A training program was also organized to strengthen management skills for senior managers.

The pilot site was tasked with, among other things, the requirement to keep cash accounts and the introduction of accrual accounting on a trial basis, which was a greater workload. The pilot site also had to work based on the old and new accounting systems for the complementary period from January 1 to March 31 of year N+1, while finalizing the 2022 budget and working on the 2023 budget. At the pilot site level, there was no resistance to the changes, thanks to the awareness, involvement, and supervision work.

On the information technology side, the development of the "ASIC" application has greatly helped the agents of the pilot site to keep the new accounts. This application allows the restitution of information and the edition of accounting documents in real time. Therefore, it meets the needs of users.

On June 14, 2022, a closing seminar was organized to valorize the results and the achievements of the twinning, and the post-twinning reform continued to consolidate the achievements of the reform. Within this framework, several actions have been initiated to test a complete accounting cycle. At present, the pilot site can be considered as operating under dual control and on an incremental flow basis (cash accounting and accrual accounting).

In addition, twinning has not only promoted compliance with international standards but has also enriched the implementation of the accrual accounting system at the communal treasury level. The pilot site, the communal treasury of EL MOURADIA, was used to test the system, paving the way for its future implementation in all communal treasuries.

Overall, this twinning program has helped modernize public finances and bring accounting practices in line with international standards. The results achieved through this initiative mark a significant step forward in the accounting reform efforts of the Algerian Ministry of Finance.

#### Semi-Structured interviews

After collecting data through semi-structured interviews, we conducted a thematic analysis using NVivo to analyze the collected information. The results of our analysis, along with the emergent themes, are presented in this section.

The study's key findings highlight a distinguished panel's pivotal roles in various reform phases, encompassing Diagnosis, Conception, Experimentation, and Training. The diagnosis phase involved assessing national treasuries, while the Conception phase tailored an accrual accounting system emphasizing inclusivity and transparency. Successful pilot implementation occurred during the

Experimentation phase. Notably, the pilot site's Head Treasurer will play a crucial role in training others, facilitating the reform's nationwide adoption. Across the board, interviewees expressed unanimous support for the reform, recognizing its significance in promoting transparency, effective governance, and accurate financial representation.

In exploring the impact of the reform project on work dynamics, we found that interviewees faced increased workloads, blending routine tasks with new reform-related responsibilities. Notably, the pilot site's head and team had to adapt to a fresh information system and dual accounting methods, effectively doubling their workload. To manage these challenges, reform actors underwent training in accrual accounting and adult pedagogy, supplemented by informative study visits to France. Support from leadership, foreign experts, and collaborative group dynamics played a crucial role in enabling their adjustment to the reform's demands, bolstering their managerial capacities.

In the study of resistance to change, it was recognized by interviewees as a natural occurrence. The value of resistance in revealing weaknesses and driving improvements was emphasized. While resistance was limited among higher project levels, instances were noted among colleagues, attributed to competency and adaptability issues. Factors contributing to resistance included communication gaps, insufficient training, fear of the unknown, and personal interests. Additional context-specific elements encompassed unforeseen events, personnel changes, legislative delays, and unclear responsibilities. The interviewees stressed the potential hindrance of unaddressed resistance to reform progress, highlighting the need for early identification and corrective actions.

The examination of communication and change management strategies within the reform process yielded significant insights from various interviewees. Emphasis was placed on timely information dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and raising awareness among relevant departments. Effective communication involving treasury agents and experts was commended. However, some interviewees expressed concerns about insufficient attention to online communication channels. The disconnect between theoretical strategies and practical implementation was discussed, along with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication processes. While a consensus on the importance of clear communication, stakeholder involvement, and resource allocation was evident, diverse viewpoints highlighted distinct priorities and challenges, including the influence of external factors such as the pandemic.

Exploring Employee Engagement and Empowerment within the reform project unveiled noteworthy insights. Emphasizing employee involvement through working groups and sensitization for active participation emerged as a key aspect. Additionally, decision-making involvement and collaboration for system implementation, aligned with operational requirements, were highlighted. The

gradual inclusion of less informed employees was considered. Despite pandemic-induced communication challenges, civil servants' engagement via trainer selection and working groups was underscored. Despite differing perspectives, a consensus emerged on the importance of communication, working groups, and training in empowering employees to make effective contributions to the reform process.

The exploration of Organizational Culture and Leadership in the reform context unveiled essential insights. Emphasis was placed on fostering collaboration and active involvement, alongside the necessity of adaptive leadership for effective reform management. In contrast, the significance of strategic roadmaps and authoritative leadership was highlighted, with stable strategies underscored for building employee trust. The effectiveness of dedicated teams was also evident. Overall, the findings underscored the pivotal role of organizational culture and leadership in successful reform, necessitating an inclusive culture, strong communication, and adaptable leadership to adeptly navigate complexities.

When it comes to the exploration of Training and Development within the accounting reform project, the identification of skills and knowledge gaps as potential hindrances was a recurring theme, with strategies like training sessions and external expert involvement being emphasized. Additionally, diverse perspectives emerged on the causes of these gaps, from recruitment issues to the adaptability of young teams. While some didn't encounter gaps, they stressed the importance of the new information system. Despite these varying viewpoints, a unanimous consensus underscored the significance of addressing skills and knowledge gaps for successful reform. Challenges and strategies spanned a spectrum, encompassing familiarity with the new system and adaptation to reform-induced changes. These findings accentuate the necessity for tailored approaches, accounting for the unique contexts within the reform process.

The examination of strategies to manage resistance to change in reform projects reveals significant insights. A cornerstone is a clear and comprehensive communication, emphasized by multiple respondents. Addressing concerns, enhancing understanding, and engaging stakeholders are key aspects of this approach. Involvement and participation also emerge as crucial strategies, with an emphasis on engaging all relevant parties and stakeholders in decision-making processes. Training and education play a pivotal role, proving effective in promoting understanding and support for reform efforts. Flexibility and adaptability are recognized as important factors in overcoming unforeseen challenges that may arise during the reform process. Additionally, setting clear deadlines and maintaining regular updates are identified as effective strategies for fostering engagement and building trust. Despite unique perspectives, there is a shared understanding among respondents regarding the significance of communication, involvement, training, flexibility, and regular updates in managing resistance to

change successfully. These strategies collectively aim to facilitate a smoother transition during the reform process.

Through analyzing interview responses, valuable insights emerged on managing resistance to change, addressing challenges, and recommending improvements for future change initiatives. A focus on mental preparedness and involving relevant stakeholders in training was highlighted. Learning from mistakes and seeking expert guidance were emphasized. Careful diagnosis, resource allocation, and clear information dissemination were underscored as key lessons. Effective communication and stakeholder engagement were recurrent themes, along with fostering a culture of sharing, participation, and recognition. Additionally, comprehensive training and early stakeholder involvement were deemed crucial. In summary, the findings highlighted communication, stakeholder engagement, training, and understanding of resistance's origins as integral approaches. These strategies promote collaboration, address concerns, build confidence, and optimize the success of reform efforts.

Through a thematic analysis using NVIVO, we examined the data line-by-line. We identified recurring patterns, concepts, and unexpected themes, adding unique and relevant aspects to the analysis. These themes represent overarching categories summarizing various aspects of the data, including patterns, attitudes, and shared experiences. Their emergence highlights the dynamic nature of qualitative analysis and the need for close engagement with the data. These new themes offer fresh insights and enrich the understanding of the research topic.

Table 1. Emergent theme (1) matrix

| Themes                   | Codes                                  | I_1 | I_2 | I_3 | I_4 | I_5 | Frequency |
|--------------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| <b>ACCOUNTING REFORM</b> |  |     |     |     |     |     | 18        |
|                          | R1: international accounting standards | 0   | 0   | 3   | 0   | 0   | 3         |
|                          | R2: New information system             | 1   | 2   | 3   | 0   | 0   | 6         |
|                          | R3: positive Reform Perception         | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 3         |
|                          | R4: Transparency                       | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 6         |

Source: Researcher generated.

The data analysis reveals a clear emphasis on the reform theme, as evidenced by multiple codes related to different aspects of the reform process. The findings indicate that the reform actors held a positive view of the reform initiative, particularly about its core value of transparency and the need to modernize accounting systems in line with international standards I\_1: "I find that this reform provides valuable insight and transparency into how public entities handle their assets and finances".

Moreover, the positive perception is complemented by an emphasis on international accounting standards, highlighting the importance of improved

accountability and efficiency in managing assets and finances within public entities.

However, the reform's complexity posed significant challenges, specifically in transitioning from cash accounting to accrual-based accounting. Communal municipalities faced difficulties in adapting to this change, necessitating the introduction of an accompanying information system (ASIC), I\_3 stated: "The primary objective of the new accounting system is to achieve timely and accurate information. The previous system, which relied on manual processes, was unable to fulfill this objective". The implementation of ASIC became crucial to enable the timely and accurate reporting of financial information.

The inclusion of these reform-related codes reflects the multifaceted nature of the reform project and draws attention to key areas that require careful consideration for successful implementation. The positive perception, emphasis on international accounting standards, and the adoption of ASIC as a technological solution contribute to the overarching objectives and outcomes of the reform. The findings underscore the significance of transparency, international accounting standards, and the adoption of appropriate technological solutions in driving the reform objectives. The results highlight the need for careful planning and effective implementation strategies to overcome the challenges associated with transitioning to accrual-based accounting and integrating ASIC into the accounting processes.

Table 2. Emergent theme (2) matrix

| Themes            | Codes  | I_1 | I_2 | I_3 | I_4 | I_5 | Frequency |
|-------------------|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| <b>CHALLENGES</b> |  |     |     |     |     |     | 14        |
|                   | CL1: COVID pandemic                            | 3   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 5         |
|                   | CL2: Increasing workload                       | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 6         |
|                   | CL3: Interdisciplinary communication obstacles | 1   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 3         |

Source: Researcher generated.

When discussing the changes introduced, the emergence of challenges as a prominent theme is noteworthy. This theme encompasses several codes, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing workload, and obstacles in interdisciplinary communication.

The significance and frequency of these challenges were underscored by multiple participants, revealing their impact within the context of the reform initiative. Specifically, the COVID pandemic emerged as a distinct challenge, significantly affecting the communication processes and introducing delays in the reform timeline. Actors had to negotiate additional time equivalent to the duration lost during the pandemic to compensate for the disruption. As I\_1 stated:

“Despite the slowdown of twinning activities during COVID, the twinning team ensured continuity by organizing remote conferences and negotiating a duration of reform equivalent to the duration of the COVID stop.”

Also, one of the most mentioned challenges was the increasing workload experienced by the reform actors and working groups involved in the project. Participants expressed the difficulty of juggling their regular day-to-day job responsibilities alongside the additional tasks associated with the reform project. For instance, participant I\_3 highlighted: “To manage both tasks simultaneously, I added additional working hours and worked on the twinning project-related tasks during my off hours and weekends. Overtime was also necessary to complete the tasks.”

Furthermore, the participants emphasized the substantial barriers posed by difficulties in interdisciplinary communication, further exacerbated by a language barrier. Notably, the IT specialists responsible for developing the information system for accrual accounting encountered challenges in effectively collaborating with the reform actors who possessed an accounting background. The language barrier hindered the seamless exchange of information and impeded the coordination required for the successful implementation of the changes. As I\_2 Shared: “Another factor that contributed to the hindrance was the poor communication between the information system specialist and the accountants, which resulted in misunderstandings and inefficiencies.”

To sum up, the analysis revealed significant challenges within the reform initiative, including the COVID-19 impact, increasing workload, and communication difficulties. These challenges emphasize the need for careful planning, effective coordination, and proactive measures to ensure successful reform implementation. Adapting to external disruptions, enhancing communication strategies, and fostering collaboration are crucial for overcoming these challenges and achieving desired outcomes.

Table 3. Emergent theme (3) matrix

| Themes  | Codes  | I_1 | I_2 | I_3 | I_4 | I_5 | Frequency |
|---|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| <b>FACTORS OF RTC</b>                         | <b>COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION</b>               | 0   | 3   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 15        |
|   | CF1: lack of communication                         | 0   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 9         |
|   | CF2: lack of information                           | 0   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 6         |
|   |  |     |     |     |     |     |           |
|   | <b>INDIVIDUAL FACTORS</b>                          | 2   | 6   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 15        |
|   | IF1: change of habits                              | 0   | 1   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 3         |
|   | IF2: Fear and Anxiety                              | 0   | 3   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 3         |
|   | IF3: lack of involvement                           | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 3         |
|   | IF4: personal interest                             | 1   | 2   | 0   | 3   | 0   | 6         |
|   |  |     |     |     |     |     |           |
|   | <b>KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS</b>                        | 1   | 4   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 12        |
|   | KS1: gaps in skills                                | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 5         |
|   | KS2: lack of competency                            | 0   | 2   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 4         |
|   | KS3: lack of training                              | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 2         |
|   | KS4: Unfamiliarity with the New Information System | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1         |
|   |  |     |     |     |     |     |           |
|   | <b>ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS</b>                      | 4   | 1   | 1   | 4   | 3   | 13        |
|   | OF1: lack of appreciation                          | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 2         |
|   | OF2: lack of allocation of resources               | 1   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 3         |
|   | OF3: organizational Restructuring                  | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2         |
| OF4: undefined timelines and responsibilities | 1  | 0   | 0   | 2   | 3   | 6   |           |

Source: Researcher generated.

Effective communication and information dissemination are pivotal for managing resistance to change, as underscored by participants. Frequent mentions (15) emphasize their significance. Particularly, access to information and robust communication channels are crucial elements for addressing resistance. However, a participant (I\_3) highlighted a lack of attention to communication, especially online platforms, citing the need for reform updates.

The sub-codes "lack of communication" and "lack of information" appeared nine and six times, respectively. These findings stress the importance of transparent communication in overcoming resistance. When channels are compromised, misunderstandings and misinformation can breed resistance.

Another notable sub-theme is individual factors influencing resistance (15 mentions). Personal aspects like habit changes, fear, and self-interest contribute, each cited three times. Lack of involvement and personal interests also hinder reform, as noted by I\_1. Addressing these is crucial for engagement. Acknowledging personal challenges helps tailor strategies, fostering ownership and commitment, thereby curbing resistance.



The matrix provides data on various sub-themes and codes, along with their occurrence frequency. Key findings are as follows: Communication & Information Sharing: This prevalent theme (63) highlights communication's pivotal role in the reform. Codes like effective communication, information sharing, and communicating objectives underscore its importance, as exemplified by I\_1's emphasis on seminars, meetings, and reassurance to manage resistance. Clear communication not only facilitates the reform but also showcases specific strategies and platforms.

Planification: Demonstrating relevance (17), planification is key. Codes related to resource allocation, diagnosis, profile selection, and a gradual approach emphasize strategic planning, as I\_3's emphasis on piloting before scaling illustrates. Thoughtful planification, including resource allocation, enhances reform execution.

Skills Training: A significant theme (26), skills training prepares stakeholders for reform. Codes like stakeholder training and training of trainers, as seen in I\_2's experience, underscore skill development's significance for successful reform implementation.

Support and Engagement: With frequency (46), Support and Engagement rank second to Communication & Information Sharing. Codes like collaborative work, involvement, motivation, and reassurance stress create a supportive and engaging environment. I\_1 highlights sensitization for involvement. These codes highlight the importance of an engaged atmosphere for reform's success.

Table 5. Emergent theme (5) matrix

| Themes          | Codes                   | I_1 | I_2 | I_3 | I_4 | I_5 | Frequency |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| <b>TEAMWORK</b> |                         |     |     |     |     |     | 26        |
|                 | TW1: arbitration        | 2   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 4         |
|                 | TW2: collaborative work | 0   | 5   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 7         |
|                 | TW3: Group dynamics     | 4   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 4         |
|                 | TW4: working groups     | 3   | 3   | 1   | 0   | 4   | 11        |

Source: Researcher generated.

Teamwork emerges as a central theme (frequency 26), with codes like arbitration, collaborative work, group dynamics, and working groups mentioned by participants. I\_2 highlights arbitration's role in resolving issues, while I\_5 emphasizes effective adaptation through a collaborative approach. Group dynamics and assigned working groups underscore teamwork's importance. These codes highlight teamwork's significance in reform, fostering cooperation and synergy among team members. Embracing these codes enhances collective efforts and reform outcomes.

## 5 DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS

This study offers valuable insights into the accounting reform project, addressing research questions and revealing new themes. It explores project actors' views on overcoming resistance and strategies. Our qualitative approach identifies a notable gap between interviewees, leaning toward strategic planning or practical execution. Their unanimous engagement facilitated successful implementation, showcasing organizational readiness for change.

The findings unveil a complex relationship between workload changes and reform, posing challenges to balancing responsibilities. Training, support, and group dynamics enable effective adaptation. These results highlight organizational support's significance for adjusting to reform-induced workload changes. Despite involvement and commitment, a dedicated group is essential for effective reform management, providing focused attention and expertise.

Results reveal a contrast between project leaders denying resistance and the pilot site head's observations of negative attitudes, demotivation, and resistance language during trainers' sessions. This resistance arises from limited competence in the new accounting system, underscoring the need to address it effectively for successful adoption.

Despite resistance, the reform's experimentation led to positive outcomes. Effective implementation strategies managed resistance and achieved favorable results. This disparity between leaders and implementers underscores challenges faced in the Algerian Accounting reform, with leaders focusing on strategic goals and daily implementers encountering practical obstacles and change resistance. This study focuses on communication challenges and organizational culture in reform projects. Communication issues arise from a lack of clear planning and underutilized e-communication channels. This hampers information dissemination and stakeholder engagement, missing timely updates and interactive exchanges. Bureaucratic structures hinder communication, and administrative processes lack adaptation for e-communication.

Despite challenges, successful reform is attributed to gradual implementation, accounting system assessment, resource allocation, and engaged participant selection. The project's key aspects involve developing an accrual-based accounting system with input from reform actors and a pilot site. An information system engages Algerian professionals. The experimentation phase, supported by experts, ensures smooth implementation. Raising awareness and controlled implementation contributes to success.

While aligned with Lewin's Change Management Model, it oversimplifies change, omitting psychological, leadership, and cultural aspects. Focusing on training and communication matches the analysis matrix but overlooks other factors. Model limitations and public administrative status challenge motivation

methods. Alternative strategies like acknowledgment and career development could address this. Despite limitations, positive engagement and knowledge sharing suggest practical model supplementation.

It is necessary to address these limitations by supplementing training and communication with diverse frameworks, considering psychology, nonlinear change, leadership, and culture for better management. Teamwork and social interactions are vital. Collaborative work, group dynamics, and arbitration foster a supportive culture, influencing reform outcomes. Leveraging teamwork enhances change efforts, encouraging collaboration, trust, and shared ownership.

The findings reveal effective strategies for resistance management: planned approaches, communication, training, support, and engagement. Teamwork and interactions also contribute significantly to reform success.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to explore effective strategies for managing resistance to change during the implementation of accounting reforms in Algeria, specifically focusing on the transition from cash accounting to accrual accounting. By adopting constructivist principles and employing a qualitative methodology, this study filled a literature gap by examining how individuals construct their perceptions of and responses to change in the context of accounting reforms.

The main findings of the study revealed valuable insights into the accounting reform project and its management. The perspectives of reform actors shed light on the challenges and strategies to overcome resistance to change. The study emphasized the importance of dedicated reform project management, effective communication, and stakeholder involvement. It highlighted the need for a clear communication plan, including the utilization of e-communication channels, and the adaptation of administrative practices to facilitate efficient communication.

Also, the results of the study showed that the introduction of the "ASIC" application was a great help to the staff at the pilot site in managing the new accounts, enabling them to access the necessary information quickly and to create and edit accounting documents within the allotted time.

Successful implementation strategies, such as gradual approaches, thorough assessment, stakeholder involvement, and continuous support, were found to be instrumental in achieving successful change outcomes. The study aligned with Lewin's Change Management Model, emphasizing the significance of careful planning and creating a supportive environment for change implementation.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the model and the need to supplement training and communication strategies with other frameworks and practices. The study underscored the positive influence of teamwork, social interactions, and a culture of collaboration, open communication, and trust on change outcomes.

The findings of this study contribute to a comprehensive understanding of resistance to change within the accounting reform project and provide recommendations for enhancing change management strategies. These insights have implications not only for Algeria's accounting reform initiative but also for other countries undergoing similar reforms and facing resistance to change. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can benefit from the lessons learned in this study to improve the success of accounting reform initiatives and promote effective change management practices.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended to undertake further research in two critical areas to advance our understanding of managing resistance to change during accounting reforms in Algeria.

Firstly, there is a need for extensive investigation into the impact of technology adoption, specifically the integration of new accounting software and digital tools, on employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the reform process. Such research would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of technology integration and strategies to overcome associated challenges. Secondly, it is crucial to explore communication strategies employed during accounting reforms to address resistance and enhance employees' comprehension and acceptance of the initiatives. Finally, this research would contribute to bridging existing gaps in the literature and offer practical insights to support the successful implementation of accounting reforms.

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**EWA MILCZAREK<sup>1</sup>**

## **CONDITIONS OF ACCESSIBILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC SPHERE<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Social media are today an essential part of the public sphere. They are the main places where citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns. Social media plays an important role in the implementation of public debate. The analysis presented here allows us to conclude that currently, social media do not meet the conditions for the public sphere. Consequently, the realization of other rights is compromised. Social media require legislators to regulate them accordingly. States have positive obligations in the form of enabling their citizens to realize public debate. It is, therefore, necessary to launch an appropriate legislative process aimed at normalizing the activities of social media to guarantee these features. The state, acting to protect citizens' rights in the digital age, should establish regulations to guarantee the pluralism and autonomy of this new public sphere.

**Key words:** Public sphere; social media; Digital public space; Public debate; Media Transparency

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Modern democratic societies are based on the functioning of a public sphere, which allows citizens to freely express their opinions, discuss common issues, and participate in political life. The public sphere is a place where free and equal citizens gather to exchange information and debate common issues. The intensive development of the Internet has led to most of the previous communication being moved online and has become one of the most important sources of information. Its key role in the communication and

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1 Faculty of Law and Administration, University of Szczecin, Narutowicza 17a, 70-240, City, Country, email: ewa.milczarek@usz.edu.pl, ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0726-0959.

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information processes of societies has meant that it is now an important means of enabling public debate.

The research hypothesis posed within the article is based on the question: should social media be considered public spaces? The determination that social media is a public space implies the need to provide it with the qualities inherent in such a space. The research context is based on the theoretical and practical aspects of the functioning of public spaces, with an emphasis on the importance of regulation in ensuring that social media meet democratic standards. The main objective of the work is to propose a regulatory framework that will enable social media to act as modern agoras, open and accessible to all citizens.

The article is an important contribution to the current debate on whether and how to regulate social media. This work aims to propose concrete solutions that can contribute to the improvement of public spaces in the digital age. By analyzing the existing challenges and proposing appropriate regulations, the work seeks to protect the fundamental principles of democracy and civil rights in the context of the rapidly evolving social media.

To be able to answer the research questions, on the one hand, we use research methods typical in legal studies combined with IT knowledge. As a result, our research material includes judicial decisions and relevant literature on legal and IT scholarships.

## 1 CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF A PUBLIC SPHERE

The idea of public life, as opposed to private affairs on the one side and affairs of office on the other, can be dated back to classical European antiquity. Aristotle was the first to separate the sphere of domestic family life - the *oikos* - from the sphere of public political life - the *polis* (Kołodziejczyk, 2024). The private sphere is divided into the sphere of intimate private life and private personal life. The former consists of a person's inner experiences and is beyond the possibility of interference. The second consists of events of personal and family life that are intended for those closest to the person. This sphere is also protected from unauthorized access. The sphere of public accessibility is outside the protection of the privacy regime (Kopff, 1971).

The distinction between private and public spheres is extremely important as it entails momentous legal consequences. The contemporary legal system has developed different norms protecting private space as a space of individual autonomy (Milczarek, 2020) and others regulating the conditions of public space. The assessment of whether we are dealing with private or public space is therefore crucial for identifying the legal consequences of the actions taken and the subjective rights we will be entitled to.

The public sphere is a place "where free and equal citizens come

together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns” (Odugbemi, 2008). The performance space of the public sphere has been transformed over the centuries, adapting to the spirit of its era. In ancient Greece, this function was performed by the Agora, the central place of assembly, commerce, and political debate. It was here that citizens could participate directly in democracy, discussing and deciding public affairs. In ancient Rome, this function was performed by the Forum Romanum. During the medieval period in Europe, this space was associated with market squares and churches. During the Enlightenment, public life was realized in salons and cafes, which became important venues for intellectual and political discussions (Bentele, Nothhaft, 2010). The public sphere provides "a close-to-the-ground, locally infirmed, dispersed arena for detecting problems, exploring them and bringing them to public view, suggesting solutions, and debating whether the problems are important and worth addressing" (Cohen, Fung, 2021).

A leading researcher of the concept of public space is Jürgen Habermas. His concept of a public sphere is widely accepted as the standard work but has also been widely challenged as the concept of the public sphere is constantly developing. By the ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. It is a basic requirement to mediate between state and society and in an ideal situation permits democratic control of state activities. To allow discussions and the formation of public opinion a record of state-related activities and legal actions must be publicly accessible. Participants in the public sphere are private individuals, who come together to rationally and critically discuss public affairs, above all the actions of governments, and who want to have an influence on institutionalised opinion- and will-formation (Habermas, 1996). The public sphere is private in its constitution but political in its function (Reese-Schäfer, 2001). According to J. Habermas, communicative structure is an essential part of the public sphere. The public sphere constitutes a much-differentiated network for communicating information and opinions that is reproduced using communicative action (Habermas, 1992).

A public sphere should serve the needs of its users and be characterized by a certain set of features (Habermas, 1989). The characteristics of a public space will be its (Holub, Habermas, 1991):

1. Openness and accessibility: Public space should be open to all citizens, regardless of their social, economic, or political status. Everyone should be able to participate in public debate.
2. Equality of participants: In public spaces, all participants should be treated equally. This equality means that the voices of all participants have equal weight and that discussions are not dominated by individuals or groups with more power or resources.

3. **Rationality of discourse:** Discussions in public spaces should be based on rational arguments and not on violence, manipulation, or propaganda. Participants should seek consensus through the exchange of views and arguments.
4. **Transparency of communication:** Information and arguments presented in public spaces should be clear, understandable, and accessible to all participants. Transparency of communication is key to enabling informed participation in the debate.
5. **Autonomy of public space:** Public space should be independent of external influences such as political or economic power. This allows for free and independent discussions on public issues.
6. **Criticality and openness to new ideas:** Public spaces should be open to a diversity of views and ready to critically analyze them. Discussions should encourage the expression of new ideas and the questioning of existing norms and values.

The public sphere fulfills several significant social roles. The first function, which is opposition and accountability, tries to restore power in the hands of the people, and public criticism and thus puts pressure on the competent authorities to act against the illegitimate sources of power. The second function of the public sphere refers to influence over policy. Civil society identifies problems, interests, and needs within a society, and brings them to the public sphere agenda. The third function of the public sphere is to promote a different way of social life publicly to achieve social change. The public sphere provides the expansion of such ideas and practices in a society (Kuljiš, 2017).

Public space takes on significant importance in democratic countries, where it is the voice of participating individuals that has the power to determine the direction of the state. Today we consider it as a sine qua non of liberal democracy (Adut, 2012). However, public influence is transformed into communicative power only after it passes through the filters of the institutionalized procedures of democratic opinion - and will formation and enter through parliamentary debates into legitimate lawmaking (Habermas, 1996). Public spheres do not stop at national borders. In an increasingly interdependent world, global attention can be focused on single issues- transnational public spheres (Habermas, 2004).

## **2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACES**

Social media is a collection of online applications, constructed on the ideological and technological assumptions of the Web 2.0 concept, allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010). Their role was initially limited to serving only a social function, focusing on keeping

in touch with one's closest group of friends. Today, social media has undoubtedly become a place where citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns. They are a vital component of political and economic life and a significant source of information. They are a sphere of our social life where public opinion is formed (Gorodnichenko, 2023; Imrovič, 2016). Activities on social media are public and have an unlimited audience. They are an intermediate structure between the political world and the private world.

According to the jurisprudence of the Polish Supreme Court, a public place is web services such as information portals, corporate portals, open discussion forums, blogs, and vlogs, access to which is not limited and therefore not protected by a login and password, limiting the possibility of the owner of the service to gain access to a separate web space for Internet users (IV KK 296/17). A public place will therefore not be such services which are intended for a significantly limited number of users only.

Despite the criticism of considering social media as a public place (Nawrocki, 2019), another interpretation would be inconsistent with its actual function and characteristics. Critics point out that social media is closer to traditional media and that a public place can only be a place in the physical sense of the word (e.g. a square).

Cyberspace is quickly becoming an alternative 'place' for everyday economic, cultural, and other human activities. It ought, therefore, to be designed according to the principles, theories, experiences, and practices that have been guiding physical place-making for thousands of years (Kalay, Marx, 2003). Place in the digital era is experienced through its digital representation (Główczyński, 2024). As already highlighted, the key element of the realm is not the physical structure but the communicative structure. The argument that a public sphere must have a physical dimension ignores the dynamic development of technology and changes in how people interact. The rapid development of new technologies opens new opportunities, penetrating into all areas of life (Imrovič, Jankoľa, Lukáč, 2018). Virtual spaces offer new opportunities for community building, information exchange, and public participation that are not constrained by geographical barriers.

Traditional media (television, magazines, radio), through a strong division between content senders and receivers, do not fit into the Habermasian definition of the public sphere because, unlike social media, it does not allow openness to all citizens and is constituted in every conversation in which individuals come together. Digitalization is leading to the expansion and fragmentation of the public sphere and is turning all participants into potential authors (Habermas, 2022). In the social-media space, there is a conjunction of two powers: to obtain and to communicate information (*Sunday Times v Great Britain*). Social media

corporations are not a producer of information, but only a space for citizens to present it. Citizens present opinions to a mass audience and interact with other users. Traditional media are entitled to present mainly one point of view (the right-wing Fox News, The Daily Telegraph, or the left-wing The Guardian or New York Times). When one point of view is favored by social media (in the form of algorithm settings), public opinion is manipulated, as the user is 'made to believe' that a particular opinion is common among the public and is thus disrupted from accessing information. The provider of content to social media (the user) cannot be treated like a journalist and affords the same protection or requirements as the content he or she provides. Treating, as critics point out, social media in the legal regime of traditional media would significantly change the legal tools that can be used.

Some researchers argue for the recognition of the Internet as a public place (Camp, Chien, 2000). One should disagree with this view. From a computer science standpoint, the Internet is a well-defined technological infrastructure of meticulously classified and categorized computers, cables, and code. In any other context, it is a gross category error to invoke the unity of the Internet (Geiger, 2010). We can characterize the Internet as a public infrastructure (Rasmussen, 2014). The Internet is a medium through which portals that we can judge as public (e.g. social media) but also private spheres (such as user clouds, and closed groups) operate. As such, the Internet cannot be considered a public sphere.

Social media is an environment of prosumers who are both consumers and producers of content (Milczarek, 2022). The user in social media is the primary subject of the public sphere (Benkler, 2006). The construction of this new sphere in a networked society takes place through the construction of communication protocols between different communication processes (Castells, 2009). Content shared through social profiles has a potentially unlimited audience. Social media in open and accessible public spaces and forums should expect to encounter and hear from those who are different, whose social perspectives, experiences, and affiliations are different (Young, 1990). The digital public sphere becomes the place for sharing our private reflections about public matters.

An analysis of the evolution of perceptions of public space in this context leads to the conclusion that social media constitutes a public place (Camp, Chien, 2000). This implies the need to adapt the Habermasian model of the public sphere to new conditions (Ochman, 2015).

### **3 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEW PUBLIC SPACE**

In the contemporary digital age, the landscape of the public sphere has been significantly altered by the rise of social media platforms. Habermas

identifies fragmentation and privatization as the most serious threats to a properly functioning public sphere (Habermas, 2022). At the beginning of the 20th century, many social media platforms were created. However, the online market tends to monopolize. Thus, despite the theoretical plurality of social media choices, it is de facto dominated by a few sites (Facebook, X, TikTok) that impose their terms on all users. This monopolistic social media landscape limits the diversity of opinions and makes the decisions of a few companies have a huge impact on the global public debate.

In addition, the social media sector has created its regulations and operating rules, often detached from common legal norms. The decisions on social-media concerns are arbitrary and final. The censorship applied by platforms is based on artificial intelligence algorithms, which carry out the exclusion of specific content from the portal. The amount of removed material is increasing year on year. The way the algorithm works, and thus the extent of preventive censorship, is not subject to public scrutiny. This creates opportunities to control and manipulate the social-media debate (Gillespie, 2012). Concerns' policies are uniformly applied without regard to national legal systems (e.g. they will remove a post reporting the sale of cannabis, even if the user is in a place where the distribution of the drug is legal). It is also worth mentioning the blocking of accounts of legitimate politicians Donald Trump or Janusz Korwin-Mikke. This has resulted in their removal from public discourse. The formulation *Lex Facebook* (Bygrave, 2015) is beginning to be adopted, as Facebook treats its Terms of Service and Standards as *lex specialis* to national law.

The justification that Facebook is a private portal and users who do not accept its provisions should simply stop using it cannot be considered. Although the portal belongs to a private company, now, by being a public sphere, it also performs public functions (Hooker, 2019). This situation imposes, as it were, obligations and standards on the portal that it must meet. It is therefore negative to deprive some citizens of the opportunity to function in a public sphere such as social media. Social media should be treated as trustees of the information of its end users (Balkin, 2011), not as disposers of it.

It is also worth noting the distinctive flow of information characteristic of the digital infrastructure of the public sphere in which there are (i) many more providers and distributors of content; (ii) people thus enjoy vastly greater choice among kinds and providers of content, and (iii) particular content can be directed (or targeted) by providers, advertisers, social media platform companies, or other actors to particular users or groups of users (Cohen, Fung, 2021). Due to the speed of information and its unverified nature, a lack of oversight of social media can have potentially negative consequences for both the individual citizen and the community (e.g. disinformation, hate speech, fake news, information bubbles (Milczarek, 2023)). Bruns suggests that search engines and social

media, together with their recommendation and personalization algorithms, are centrally culpable for the societal and ideological polarisation experienced in many countries (Bruns, 2019).

As this analysis has shown, there are significant differences between traditional public spaces and social media. Firstly, social media spaces are owned by private actors who exercise extensive governance; second, this sphere is characterized by the possibility of unlimited preventive and consequential censorship and control of information flows; thirdly, it has a wide range of content audiences (Milczarek, 2022); and fourth, it is characterized by the speed of information dissemination. These differences in the functioning of traditional and digital public spaces have far-reaching consequences for the quality and integrity of public debate.

Nowadays, leaving social media outside state regulation has led to its malfunctioning, resulting in a dysfunctional public debate (e.g. Brexit, the 2016 Clinton - Trump election, the anti-vaccine movement). Habermas' diagnosis of the dangers of digitization is grim. Epistemically, the worry is threefold: first, citizens will lose access to trustworthy sources of facts and information upon which to build considered opinions; second, citizens will become skeptical and distrustful of all sources of facts and information, including trustworthy ones; and, finally, citizens will believe that fellow citizens have lost access to trustworthy sources of fact and information and so lose trust in democracy (Chambers, 2023). It is therefore necessary to review the fundamentals of social media.

#### **4 CONCLUSIONS: REGULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PUBLIC SPHERE**

Social media are the consequences and causes of new relationships in the networked public sphere (Brol, Czetwertyński, 2015). The social-media space is fundamentally different from other public spaces. The application of existing legal solutions, due to the scale of infringements and the speed of information dissemination, is ineffective. This implies the need for a separate regulation that takes these differences into account.

Critics of potential regulation, whether state or corporate, point out that through control they colonize and thereby destroy the potential of social media in the public sphere (Fuchs, 2014). The analysis presented here allows us to conclude that the current functioning of social media does not meet the conditions for public places, including accessibility, the balance of participants in the debate, and the possibility to express views within common law standards. The result of this is the disruption of public debate and thus a threat to democratic processes (Barber, 2003). Control is therefore necessary.

Although the management of social media is handled by private corporations, responsibility for violations nevertheless lies with the state, which has positive obligations to ensure an adequate level of protection of rights. According to the doctrine of the horizontal impact of constitutional rights (*Drittwirkung*), there is an extension of state responsibility to the actions of various private actors (Wróblewska, 2014). Responsibility for the proper functioning of public places is, in this relationship, a state responsibility concerning the law-making plane, the law-application plane, and the actions of state officials of a factual nature. For the social media sector to meet Habermas' conditions of public space, it should be regulated in a way that provides the following key features and functions:

1. **Openness and accessibility:** Public space should be accessible to all citizens. Regulations should therefore ensure that access to social media platforms is not restricted. Social media corporations should therefore not be able to block users and thus eliminate them from public spaces,
2. **Equality of participants:** All participants in discussions on social media platforms should be treated equally. This means that algorithms and content moderation mechanisms must be transparent and ensure that no group or individual has an advantage over others. In practice, this may mean introducing regulations regarding the transparency of algorithms and content management mechanisms.
3. **Rationality of discourse:** Discussions should be based on rational arguments and not on violence, manipulation, or propaganda. Regulations should therefore promote transparency of information and counter disinformation through appropriate fact-checking mechanisms and sanctions for spreading false information.
4. **Autonomy of public space:** Public space should be independent from external influences such as political or economic power. This means that regulations should ensure that content moderation decisions are not made based on external pressures, but according to clear and publicly available rules by an independent body.
5. **Criticality and openness to new ideas:** The public space should be open to a diversity of views and ready to critically analyze them. Social media platforms should therefore promote pluralism of opinion and ensure that different points of view can be freely expressed and discussed.
6. **Accountability of platforms:** As a public space, social media should be held accountable for its operation. This means that platforms should be legally obliged to protect user data, prevent abuse, and comply with legal standards by national and international law.

In the context of these challenges, it may be necessary to create a new

regulatory framework that takes into account the specificity of social media as a modern public space. States should work towards implementing such regulations that promote openness, transparency, and accountability while protecting fundamental democratic principles and freedom of expression.

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**RASTISLAV KRÁL<sup>1</sup> - VIKTÓRIA ADAMOV KRÁĽOVÁ<sup>2</sup>**

## **DISPUTES IN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT ARISING OUT OF THE MAYOR'S POWER OF SUGGESTION<sup>3</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The paper presents an analysis of a specific problem of disputes in the functioning of municipal self-government in Slovakia. It examines possible disputes caused by the clash of conflicting interests of the municipal council and the mayor in such votes of the council, the content of which is conditioned by the mayor's proposal. Through critical analysis, the article presents possible situations of this type of dispute. At the same time, the paper presents the views of the professional public on this topic and, with further use of the methods of synthesis and scientific abstraction, provides insight into the impact of the existence of this type of dispute on the functioning of municipal government. The authors conclude by offering *de lege ferenda* proposals that could contribute to improving the existing situation. They present ways of changing the scope of competences of municipal authorities and, finally, they draw attention to the possibility of alternative ways of resolving potential disputes, through mediation.

**Key words:** dispute, local self-government, municipality, competence, mayor, council

### **INTRODUCTION**

This Local self-government is a key player in meeting the needs and solving the problems of local communities. In the Slovak Republic, municipalities are the basic unit of local self-government. Important for the quality of life of the inhabitants of municipalities is the smooth and trouble-free performance of local government, which is carried out through the municipal authorities. These

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1 Faculty of Public Administration, University of P. J. Šafárik in Košice, Popradská 66, 040 01 Košice, Slovakia, [rastislav.kral@upjs.sk](mailto:rastislav.kral@upjs.sk), ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5584-0329>

2 Faculty of Public Administration, University of P. J. Šafárik in Košice, Popradská 66, 040 01 Košice, Slovakia, [viktoria.kralova@upjs.sk](mailto:viktoria.kralova@upjs.sk), ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4815-3132>

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are the mayor and the municipal council.

There may also be problem areas in the relationship between these municipal bodies. In the literature, we can find many examples where the mutual functioning of these bodies can be described as problematic, sometimes unclear, ambiguous, or even contradictory (Dudor and Hašanová, 2013; Palúš, 2009; Palúš, 2013; Šúrek, 2008; Tekeli, 2016). In many cases, the courts have had to provide answers to contentious and ambiguous situations in the exercise of competencies in the management of the municipality. Even though local government in the modern concept after 1989 has been functioning for several decades, this topic seems to be still alive and offers many surprising situations. The purpose of this paper is to identify a specific type of dispute that may arise between a mayor and a municipal council. It is a dispute arising from the mayor's design competence. Therefore, we can speak of a certain type of competency conflict that can ultimately cause problems in the functioning of municipal government.

The intention is to analyze in detail the current legislation that allows for the emergence of a conflicting position of municipal authorities. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the negative effects that the existence of a conflict can have on the municipality and the entities established or created by it. In the context of the identified problem, an attempt will be made to consider the possibilities of using alternative means of dispute resolution. At the same time, we will try to propose *de lege ferenda* solutions to promote thinking on the improvement of the current state of legislation.

## METHODOLOGY

To fulfill the objective of this paper, several research methods were used in the research work. Their combination and balanced use helped to formulate the research questions. At the same time, the methods were a means for conducting the actual research based on data collection, study of background documents, verification of findings, etc. Finally, they were fully utilized in formulating the conclusions and opinions of the present paper.

For our work, the methods sought and used mainly in the social science branches of research were used as key. This group of methods was honestly supplemented and supported using a group of methods having a technical or technological character.

The selection and use of individual methods was also influenced by our efforts to link the theoretical-analytical investigation of this administrative-legal issue with the possibilities of translating the research results into concrete recommendations for legislative amendments. These possibilities of amending the legislation could to some extent improve the implementation of practical

activities in the conditions of municipal governments in Slovakia.

The starting point for the development of the paper was the use of a reasonable degree of scientific abstraction and a degree of selection to identify areas of social relations in which areas of public administration are unclear, imprecise or otherwise unexplored. Consequently, the method of basic analysis of the legal regulation regulating the identified social relations in the *de lege lata* plane was used. Inevitably, we had to proceed to the application of methods of interpretation of the legal norm. The analysis was also present in the identification of the opinions of other authors, quoted in the article, who bring a special perspective on the issue under study. When searching for legislative, book or Internet sources of information, methods of work with information and communication technologies were used, again supported by the necessary degree of verification and selection. The knowledge gained from the analysis of relevant legislation and literature was synthesised into a coherent text of the paper. Using the methods of legal logic and critical analysis, new proposals and themes have been developed in *de lege ferenda* terms. These are suggestions that could inspire further academic and professional debate or provide a direct basis for changes in legislation.

Using the selected methods, we formulated two basic research questions for our area of investigation: I: Does the current legislation in Slovakia allow for the emergence of a conflict situation between the mayor and the municipal council arising from the mayor's drafting competence? II: Are there legislative possibilities to resolve a potential dispute between the mayor and the municipal council using alternative tools, e.g. mediation?

Through the above-mentioned, but also less used other complementary, methods, we have tried to seek an adequate answer to the formulated questions.

## **1 THE MAYOR'S UNIQUE RIGHT TO MAKE SPECIAL PROPOSALS**

The basic legal regulation for determining the competencies of the mayor and the municipal council is Act No. 369/1990 Coll. on Municipal Establishment, as amended (hereinafter also referred to as the "Municipal Establishment Act"). A detailed and consistent interpretation of the legal norms related to the determination and regulation of the mutual relations between the municipal authorities with each other can be found in the professional literature (Jesenko, 2017; Kráľová, 2022; Tekeli, Hoffmann, Tomáš, 2021; Tekeli, 2016; Palúš, 2018 and others). These are legal norms determining the rules according to which the competence of one or the other municipal authority in deciding on municipal affairs is determined.

The problem that we want to present and draw attention to in this paper lies in the situation where the council votes on a proposal that only the mayor of the municipality is entitled to put forward. It is therefore within his exclusive competence to propose the content of the resolution. At the same time, for the mayor's proposal to be put into practice, the council must agree with the mayor's proposal and for the proposal to be approved by a vote of the requisite number of members.

This situation is foreseen by the Municipal Act when filling senior positions in organizations of which the municipality is the founder. According to Article 11(4)(1), "the municipal council shall decide on the basic issues of municipal life, in particular, it shall establish, dissolve and control budgetary and contributory organizations of the municipality and, on the proposal of the mayor, appoint and dismiss their heads (directors), establish and dissolve commercial companies and other legal entities and approve municipal representatives to their statutory and control bodies, as well as approve the municipality's participation in a legal entity". We think that when filling statutory and controlling bodies of companies and other legal entities, the law does not require that the proposal submitted for these positions must necessarily be submitted by the mayor of the municipality.

In the case of budgetary organizations, it is necessary to mention an exception to the general rule described above, and more precisely in the case of primary schools, of which municipalities are the founders. The process of election of a candidate for school director is regulated by a special legal regulation No 596/2003 Coll. on State Administration in Education and School Self-Government and Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts (hereinafter also referred to as the "School Act"), which provides that "the principal shall be appointed for a term of office and dismissed by the founder of the school or by the founder of the school establishment" (§3(1) of the School Act)". In the present case, the appointment of the future headmaster is a matter for the mayor of the municipality, since the *lex specialis*, in this case the Education Act, *ex lege* precludes the application of the provisions of Article 11(4)(1). The appointment of the principal of the school thus remains entirely within the competence of the mayor of the municipality.

Another proposal power of the mayor concerns the mayor himself, where the mayor himself may propose to the municipal council to shorten the scope of his duties. According to article 11(4)(i) of the Municipal Establishment Act, "the municipal council shall decide on the fundamental issues of municipal life, in particular, it is reserved ..... to change the scope of the mayor's office during the term of office on the mayor's proposal." The Municipal Establishment Act does not give any reasons why this could be done. This could be for example personal reasons, health reasons, but also a situation where there is not enough

money in the municipal budget to cover the mayor's salary and other municipal needs at the same time. In this case, the municipal council may also reject or not approve the proposal.

The mayor also uses the power of suggestion in the case of the appointment and dismissal of the chief of the municipal police. Act No 564/1991 Coll. on the Municipal Police, as amended (hereinafter also referred to as the 'Municipal Police Act') regulates the procedure for the appointment of the chief of the municipal police in such a way that, according to Article 2(3), "the chief of the municipal Police shall be appointed and dismissed by the municipal council on the proposal of the mayor". The chief of the municipal police manages the activities of the municipal police (Section 6 of the Municipal Police Act). In the absence of the chief, he is replaced by a deputy, whom the chief himself appoints from among the other rank-and-file members of the municipal police.

If it is a municipal police department whose organizational scope and especially the scope of tasks requires a full and permanent deputy chief, a permanent deputy chief may be elected according to the Municipal Police Act. In this case, however, the deputy chief will not be chosen by the chief himself, but the scheme of the mayor's power of proposal will again be applied. The mayor will propose the person of the deputy chief of the municipal police to the municipal council, which will decide on this proposal.

## 2 POTENTIAL SOURCE OF CONFLICT

In the situations described above, there is a specification of the activities of the municipal council. In these activities, the mayor creates the content of the resolution by which the council exercises its statutory competence in the administration and management of the municipality. The council effectively expresses its approval or disapproval of the proposal put forward. The council itself, namely the individual members (deputies), cannot propose the draft resolution and, in our opinion, cannot modify the proposal submitted by the mayor. If a proposal were to come from someone other than the mayor and the council were to approve it, or if the deputies were to modify the mayor's proposal without the mayor's additional consent to the change, it would be a null and void administrative act.

If we note a common feature of the statutorily contemplated situations in the mayor's proposal power, except for one situation, there are always personnel nominations to fill management positions. In one case, it is a modification of the scope of the position of mayor. However, it is always a matter of deciding on personnel issues concerning the administration or management of the municipality and its close organizations.

When filling management positions, these are positions in organizations

where the municipality has a direct influence and impact on their activities. The two-step, or perhaps two-round, confirmation of the appointment of a particular person to a management position increases his or her legitimacy for the performance of that position and has the ambition to be a guarantee of the selection of a capable and quality candidate.

It is the two-round confirmation of the approval process that can create situations where the interest in filling a position with a particular person can be ambivalent between the mayor and the council. This creates a mismatch in perceptions about the filling of the chief in organizations.

Non-compliance may be expressed by the mayor's motion not even being discussed by the council (by removing it from the agenda) or by not passing a resolution on the matter (i.e. a vote will be taken, but the necessary number of votes will not be reached). This will result in the position not being filled. This can cause complications for the running of the organization, particularly in situations where the organization does not have a new head (director) at the time of the appointment of the new head (e.g. the original head has resigned immediately or has died).

In practice, this time gap between the end of the mandate of the original head and the election of a new one is sometimes replaced by the granting of some type of delegation of authority (issued by the mayor), although we do not find, in our opinion, any support for this method of managing the organization in the Slovak legislation. Alternatively, the use of a system of substitution, based on the organisation's founding or internal regulations, may be used to overlap the time-space, if the substitution of the head is regulated by these documents. If we consider the same situation in terms of the municipal police, the situation there is slightly different, since the municipal police is a force, whose officers are governed either by the instructions of the chief or by the orders of the mayor (§7(a) of the Municipal Police Act). Therefore, if the mayor's proposal for the appointment of a person as chief of the municipal police is not accepted by the council, we could speak of the existing system of providing for the executive management of the municipal police force, whereby the force will be governed by the mayor's orders. However, the day-to-day management of the force, imposing tasks, and solving labor, technical, security, and other issues directly by the mayor seems to be an unsystematic and illusory solution.

Nor can it be forgotten that when the mayor's power of nomination is to nominate a person for an appointment to a position, the mayor may equally nominate the removal of that person from the position. A conflict may equally arise in proposing the removal of a person from a particular post.

Another conflict may arise from the passivity of the mayor who does not bring a proposal to the council at all. Therefore, the council would not be able to apply its competence and decide on the matter.

An interesting topic, perhaps worthy of a separate study, would be the consideration of the dicta of responsibility of the municipal authorities in the cases described. We are thinking of inaction if the mayor fails to submit any proposal within a reasonable time. On the other hand, the mayor's failure to accept and frustrate the mayor's power of proposal by the council's failure to allow the council to discuss the item in question (the mayor's proposal is removed from the agenda).

### **3 CONFLICT RESOLUTION USING ALTERNATIVE METHODS AND DE LEGE FERENDA IDEAS**

Disputes are and will be an inherent part of municipal self-government in Slovakia. In our opinion, the situations described in the text above do not have a clear legislative solution. This category of conflict also encourages us to consider the possibility of using alternative methods of dispute resolution. Both Slovak and foreign authors dealing with the issue of alternative methods of dispute resolution accentuate the advantages of using these methods in such situations in public administration, the legal solution of which is either unclear or too lengthy (Molitoris, 2016a; Molitoris, 2016b; Molitoris, 2013; Molitoris, 2018).

The basic effort in resolving even this type of conflict should be to try to reach a mutually agreeable agreement within acceptable timeframes. To minimize negative impacts on the performance of public administration in the municipality. Infighting, intolerance, and distancing between the mayor and the council are certainly not conducive to fulfilling the basic principles of good governance (Molitoris, Žofčinová, 2024; Ščensná, 2017).

Mediation can be a tool with the ambition to help resolve potential disputes in municipal self-government in Slovakia. The willingness to mutually discuss the root causes of a dispute, its impact, and the possibilities of resolution by involving an experienced professional, a mediator, can bring the desired result in the form of a constructive solution (Žofčinová, Molitoris, 2023; Chadimová, 2018a; Chadimová, 2018b; Tragalová, 2014).

In the context of the possibility of using mediation, negative elements also come to the fore, especially in the sense of the time and financial complexity and, above all, the uncertain outcome of the process. In this case, however, it is desirable to see mediation as an option, as a way, or as an opportunity for finding solutions that could help the municipality to overcome the disputed situation. In this situation, we perceive as very important, in particular, the willingness to discuss and negotiate the conflict and to support one's position with rational arguments.

If we were to think in terms of de lege ferenda legal changes that could to

some extent contribute to eliminating the emergence of disputes in the adoption of council resolutions under the mayor's power of proposal, the following four directions could be pointed out.

The first option is the absolute elimination of the mayor's power of proposal and thus the cancellation of the two-round system for the selection of leaders. This means that a proposal for a resolution on the election or appointment of managers, or of a chief of police, could also be made by the mayor, but also by another entity, particularly a member of the local council. The final decision-making power would remain with the collective body - the municipal council. This would eliminate the competence dispute. An indirect tax for such a solution could be that people with whom the mayor may not agree or may not be satisfied with their professional or personal profile will be elected to leadership positions. The legitimacy of filling the position would be diminished to some extent.

The second option is to transfer the competence of selecting (electing, appointing) leaders directly to the mayor. Without the need for further approval by the municipal council. This situation would again eliminate the competence design conflict. However, the election of leaders is explicitly defined in the Municipal Act as one of the competencies of the municipal council. Therefore, at this point, we would see this option as a more realistic option, especially for the situation concerning the chief of the municipal police. Our view can be supported by the fact that the Law on Municipal Police itself already contains dicta significantly subordinating the activities of the municipal police directly to the management and coordination activities of the mayor of the municipality. Therefore, it may not seem to be a completely irrational idea that the mayor should also be able to choose directly the person he trusts to carry out the tasks of an executive nature. The chief of municipal police is ultimately accountable to the mayor for the results of his or her work as well. Because even under the current legislation, if there is great dissatisfaction with the work of the chief executive, for example among the deputies, it must always be the mayor who proposes his dismissal.

The potential transfer of additional competencies exclusively to the mayor only reinforces a long-emphasized theme and the need to fill this post with highly qualified professionals. People who are managerially skilled for management in public administration and whose natural leadership is directed towards protecting and fulfilling the public interest in the management of local government units (Molčan, Čajková, 2023; Jankelová et al., 2021; Čajková et al., 2023).

As a third alternative solution, some regulation of the mayor's design competence comes into consideration by setting deadlines for submission of proposals. In case there is a need to fill the position of the head of a budgetary

or contributory organization or the chief of the municipal police, there would be a statutory time limit within which the mayor would have to submit a proposal to the council to fill the position. Should the mayor fail to submit a proposal within this time limit, which should of course be reasonable, the possibility of submitting proposals would be extended to deputies of the council. The tabling of a motion would be understood as the submission of a specific proposal to the municipal council. In this way, the two-step approval process would be maintained, but there would be a legal possibility to react to possible inaction by the mayor.

The fourth and final suggestion, which would provide a means of eliminating the dispute described above, is a mechanism whereby, in addition to the mayor's proposal, the deputy's proposal to fill the leadership position would also be admitted. Provided that an increased quorum of valid votes would be required to pass such a motion. For example, 3/5 of those present or even 3/5 of all members. This would eliminate possible inaction by the mayor, but at the same time open the possibility for the council not to be dependent solely on the mayor's proposal.

In this sense, it is a legislative instrument that is unprecedented in the conditions of municipal self-government in Slovakia. This is because, given the origin of the proposal put forward, a different quorum of valid votes could be required to pass it when voting on the same matter. From a technical point of view, we do not see this solution as problematic. Rather, we wonder whether it would not lead to slight confusion and complication in the negotiation and the approval process in the council. Despite this concern, we offer this option as one of the options to address the problem described.

While we have presented several proposals that could help resolve the situation, each of these proposals would modify the current relationship between the mayor and the council. The professional debate among academics, mayors, deputies, and other professionals should, in our view, be directed toward whether any of the proposals put forward are so practical, pragmatic, and useful that it would be worth adjusting the mutual competencies between the municipal authorities.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we identify a potential source of conflict between the mayor and the municipal council in the use of the unique mayor's right to make special proposals. These are the cases of elections and appointments of leaders in municipal budget and contributory organizations and the post of chief of the municipal police. This is a dispute linked to the competencies of municipal bodies, which can make it difficult and disruptive for the continued operation

of organizations that are of fundamental importance to the municipality and its inhabitants. These may be retirement homes, health facilities, sports clubs, community centers, and many others that need to have people at their heads who will manage them and be accountable for their activities.

The presented analysis and description of conflict situations from the environment of municipal self-government, offers a positive answer to the first of the research questions, which was: I: Does the current legislation in Slovakia allow the emergence of a conflict situation between the mayor and the municipal council arising from the mayor's drafting competence? In the context of the second research question, we focused our attention on alternative ways of resolving the conflict, the possible emergence of which we identified. The second research question was: II: Are there legislative possibilities to resolve a potential dispute between the mayor and the municipal council using alternative tools, e.g. mediation? In the paper, we presented a reflection on the use of an alternative option to resolve a potential dispute through mediation. But with an awareness of the pitfalls that this method brings to practice. These are mainly the time and financial problems associated with the use of mediation, and particularly the uncertainty of its non-guaranteed outcome. In general, we are inclined to the opinion that the use of the institution of mediation in public administration in Slovakia is rather exceptional. Nevertheless, we see it as a good opportunity to seek a solution to disputes by mutual agreement of the disputing parties.

To improve the situation of potential conflict between the council and the mayor, we have made four concrete proposals in terms of *de lege ferenda* that could help to eliminate the emergence of the conflict described between the municipal authorities. These are legislative changes correcting the mayor's exclusive power of proposal.

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LUKÁŠ CÍBIK<sup>1</sup>

# OPENNESS AS A DETERMINANT OF THE ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN SLOVAKIA<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The primary objective of this research is to identify and quantify the relationship between the openness of local self-governments and their financial health in the Slovak Republic. The study focuses on the largest cities, municipal districts, and the largest municipality in Slovakia during the period from 2010 to 2022. Through correlation analysis, it examines whether and to what extent openness, measured by eleven indicators, influences financial health, and is assessed using ten financial metrics. The methodology employed in this study integrates 11 indicators of openness and 10 financial metrics to systematically evaluate their correlation across 100 Slovak local self-governments during the period 2010–2022. The analysis confirms a strong positive correlation (0.71), with key findings highlighting that municipalities with higher openness tend to manage public resources more efficiently, particularly in areas like municipal enterprises, public participation, and access to information.

**Key words:** openness, economic efficiency, Slovakia, local self-government, correlation

## INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and interconnected world, the issue of openness and transparency in public administration is crucial for the effective functioning of democratic systems. In Slovakia, as in many other countries, the importance of evaluating the openness and financial health of local self-governments has been growing (Džuňová, Douša, Koreňová, 2024). These factors play a vital

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1 Institute of Political Sciences and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, lukas.cibik@ucm.sk, ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1658-2266>.

2 The contribution was based on the solution of the project VEGA 1/0312/22 – Openness as a determinant of the financial health of Slovak cities.

role in ensuring public trust, managing public resources efficiently (Butoracová Šindleryová, Turčan, 2023), personnel policies (Mura, Zsigmond, 2024) and supporting sustainable regional development (Kóňa, Horváth, Brix, 2022). Over the past two decades, significant attention has been paid to examining the financial aspects of local self-government in Slovakia. Research has primarily focused on efficiency and economic management in public finances, as well as on the impact of transparency and openness on the financial health of municipalities.

According to available information, a research project addressing the practical connection between openness and financial health has not yet been conducted in Slovakia. Both domestic and international literature provide theoretical frameworks and case studies focusing either on openness or on financial health (Padovani, 2023; Lee, Ham, Choi, 2016; Mitić, Andrejevic, 2018; Keco et al., 2019; Ashirbekova, Sansyzbaeva, 2024; Ismailova, Kalymbetova, 2023), but an integrated study linking these two areas remains absent. This makes the current research a pilot study that bridges two distinct fields of scientific inquiry.

In the Slovak context, studies examining the correlation between openness and the financial health of local self-governments are lacking. This gap presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between these two aspects in a sample of 100 local self-governing units. The findings of this research provide new insights into whether and how the openness of self-governments contributes to more efficient and sustainable management. Moreover, this study expands the current knowledge in public administration, particularly regarding the factors that can improve the financial health of Slovak local self-government.

Preliminary results from the research indicate the existence of a significant relationship between openness and the economic efficiency of Slovak local self-governments (Cívik, 2023; Cívik, Švikruha, 2023; Cívik, Mikuš, 2022; Cívik, Mikuš, 2021). These findings lay the groundwork for a comprehensive analysis of the entire sample of municipalities, suggesting a positive correlation between the studied variables.

## 1 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the correlation between the degree of openness and the economic efficiency of 100 selected local self-governments in Slovakia during the period 2010–2022. The research focuses on the largest cities, municipal districts, and the largest municipality in Slovakia, using correlation analysis to identify the relationship between openness in governance and financial health.

Table 1. Dimensions of Openness

| Dimensions of Openness                        | Description   |
|---|---|
| I. Access to Information                      | Evaluation of public access to information through various communication channels.          |
| II. Public Participation in Decision-Making   | Assessment of the degree of public involvement in local decision-making processes.          |
| III. Public Procurement and Service Provision | Level of transparency in public tenders and procurement processes.                          |
| IV. Sale and Lease of Property                | Disclosure and transparency in property management.   |
| V. Budget and Contracts                       | Evaluation of public access to information on budgets and contracts with third parties.     |
| VI. Subsidies and Grants                      | Assessment of transparency in the allocation of subsidies and grants.                       |
| VII. Housing and Social Facilities            | Transparency in the management of housing stock and social service facilities.              |
| VIII. Personnel Policy                        | Evaluation of transparency in personnel matters, including recruitment processes.           |
| IX. Ethics and Conflict of Interest           | Assessment of measures to prevent conflicts of interest and adherence to ethical standards. |
| X. Urban Planning and Building Authority      | Monitoring transparency in urban planning and building authority processes.                 |
| XI. Municipal Enterprises and Investments     | Evaluation of the management of municipal enterprises and local investments.                |

Source: Own processing based on Transparency International Slovakia, 2024.

Openness was operationalized through eleven indicators, while financial health was evaluated based on ten economic and financial metrics. This research integrates the dimensions of openness and financial health, requiring precise definition and quantification of openness levels across local self-government.

The process involved using eleven key indicators representing various aspects of openness, such as transparency, citizen participation in decision-making, and the quality of public administration.

Maximum scores for individual areas of openness were weighted based on their importance, with the total possible score set at 100. To enhance methodological consistency and accuracy, the original scoring methodology of Transparency International Slovakia was adapted into a percentage scale, representing the proportion of points achieved relative to the maximum possible score. This adjustment allowed for greater standardization of results, creating a robust foundation for comparison with financial metrics.

The relative assessment of openness provides a quantitatively precise representation of the transparency levels of local self-governments, contributing to a deeper understanding of their governance processes and economic performance.

The economic efficiency of local self-governments was analyzed based on ten comprehensive financial and economic indicators that reflect diverse aspects of fiscal stability and efficiency in municipal management. This multidimensional approach provided a representative and precise picture of the financial condition of individual municipalities.

The original scoring system, developed by INEKO and ranging from 0 to 6 points, was transformed into a percentage format to ensure methodological consistency and standardization. This percentage representation reflects the relative share of the achieved score compared to the maximum possible score, enabling a standardized comparison of economic efficiency levels among municipalities. This transformation offers an exact foundation for evaluating and comparing municipalities in terms of their economic efficiency and the effectiveness of their public financial management, highlighting their relative strengths and weaknesses at the local level.

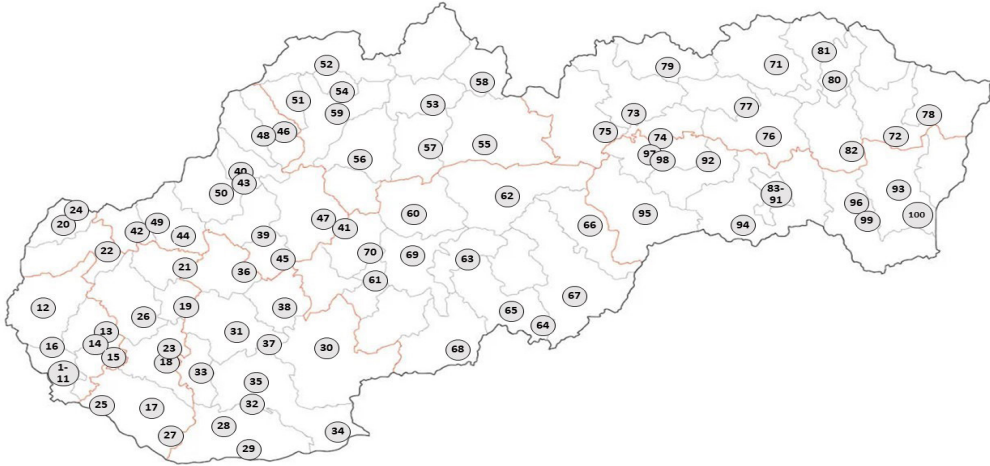
Table 2 Dimensions of Economic Efficiency

| Dimensions of Economic Efficiency       | Description   |
|---|---|
| I. Total Debt                           | Represents total indebtedness relative to income.                                     |
| II. Debt Service                        | Assesses the share of debt repayments in total current income.                        |
| III. Current Account Balance            | Difference between current income and expenses.                                       |
| IV. Overdue Liabilities                 | The ratio of overdue liabilities to current income.                                   |
| V. Liabilities Outstanding for 60+ Days | Long-term liabilities and their impact on financial stability.                        |
| VI. Basic Balance                       | Reflects the net position of a municipality in managing current and capital accounts. |
| VII. Investment Intensity               | The ratio of investment expenditures to total income.                                 |
| VIII. Net Assets                        | Evaluates the value of assets per capita.   |
| IX. Immediate Liquidity                 | Ability to quickly cover short-term liabilities.                                      |
| X. Prompt Liquidity                     | The ratio of short-term assets to short-term liabilities.                             |

Source: Own processing based on INEKO, 2024.

The input data for this research were sourced from publicly available datasets and databases provided by Transparency International Slovakia (<https://samosprava.transparency.sk/>) and INEKO (<https://www.hospodarenieobci.sk/>). Missing data were supplemented with information directly obtained from specific local self-governments and the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. In total, the primary analysis included over 12,000 data points (21 indicators × 6 years × 100 administrative units).

Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of the Research Sample



Legend: 1. Bratislava, 2. Bratislava - Devínska Nová Ves, 3. Bratislava - Dúbravka, 4. Bratislava - Karlova Ves, 5. Bratislava - Nové Mesto, 6. Bratislava - Petržalka, 7. Bratislava - Podunajské Biskupice, 8. Bratislava - Rača, 9. Bratislava - Ružinov, 10. Bratislava - Staré Mesto, 11. Bratislava - Vrakuňa, 12. Malacky, 13. Modra, 14. Pezinok, 15. Senec, 16. Stupava, 17. Dunajská Streda, 18. Galanta, 19. Hlohovec, 20. Holíč, 21. Piešťany, 22. Senica, 23. Sered', 24. Skalica, 25. Šamorín, 26. Trnava, 27. Veľký Meder, 28. Kolárovo, 29. Komárno, 30. Levice, 31. Nitra, 32. Nové Zámky, 33. Šaľa, 34. Štúrovo, 35. Šurany, 36. Topoľčany, 37. Vrábľa, 38. Zlaté Moravce, 39. Bánovce nad Bebravou, 40. Dubnica nad Váhom, 41. Handlová, 42. Myjava, 43. Nová Dubnica, 44. Nové Mesto nad Váhom, 45. Partizánske, 46. Považská Bystrica, 47. Prievidza, 48. Púchov, 49. Stará Turá, 50. Trenčín, 51. Bytča, 52. Čadca, 53. Dolný Kubín, 54. Kysucké Nové Mesto, 55. Liptovský Mikuláš, 56. Martin, 57. Ružomberok, 58. Tvrdošín, 59. Žilina, 60. Banská Bystrica, 61. Banská Štiavnica, 62. Brezno, 63. Detva, 64. Filákov, 65. Lučenec, 66. Revúca, 67. Rimavská Sobota, 68. Veľký Krtíš, 69. Zvolen, 70. Žiar nad Hronom, 71. Bardejov, 72. Humenné, 73. Kežmarok, 74. Levoča, 75. Poprad, 76. Prešov, 77. Sabinov, 78. Snina, 79. Stará Ľubovňa, 80. Stropkov, 81. Svidník, 82. Vranov nad Topľou, 83. Košice, 84. Košice - Dargovských hrdinov, 85. Košice - Juh, 86. Košice - Nad jazerom, 87. Košice - Sever, 88. Košice - Sídlisko KVP, 89. Košice - Sídlisko Ťahanovce, 90. Košice - Staré Mesto, 91. Košice - Západ, 92. Krompachy, 93. Michalovce, 94. Moldava nad Bodvou, 95. Rožňava, 96. Sečovce, 97. Smižany, 98. Spišská Nová Ves, 99. Trebišov, 100. Veľké Kapušany

Source: Own processing.

Based on the primary analysis of input data, secondary (average) values were calculated for each local self-government unit for the respective years. These values allowed the identification of aggregate average data for the entire research sample. The main objective of the study was achieved by determining the aggregate correlation coefficient. For a more detailed quantification of the relationships between subcategories of openness and economic efficiency, disaggregated correlation coefficients were also presented for specific areas of openness in the context of aggregate economic efficiency.

The research sample consisted of 100 local administrative units in Slovakia, including 79 cities, 18 municipal districts, two magistrates, and the largest municipality in Slovakia (Smižany). This cross-sectional sample was targeted at the most significant population centers in Slovakia, representing various population size categories and covering the entire geographical territory of the Slovak Republic. To ensure high representativeness, the analysis focused on administrative units from all self-governing regions, evenly distributed across Slovakia.

## 2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study is to determine the level of correlation between openness and economic efficiency in 100 selected local self-governments in Slovakia during the years 2010–2022. The research focuses on the largest cities, municipal districts, and the largest municipality in Slovakia. Using correlation analysis, the study explores whether and to what extent openness, measured by eleven indicators, influences financial health, assessed by ten financial and economic metrics.

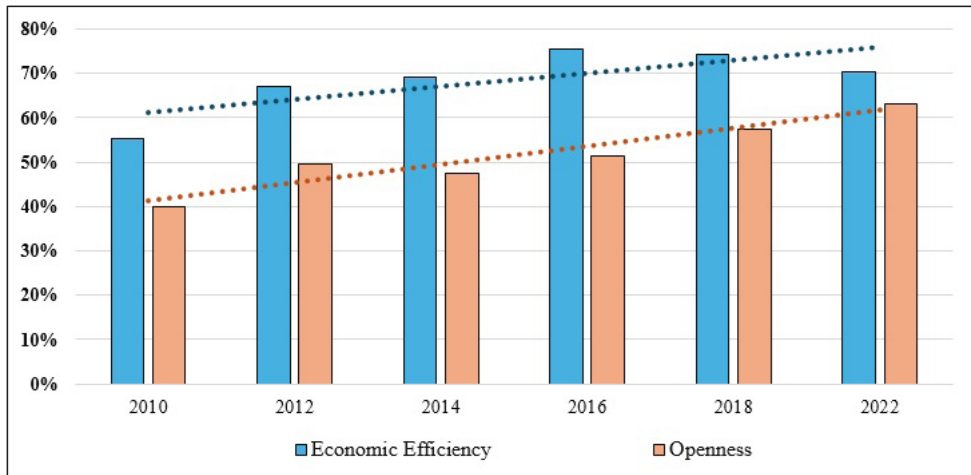
Aggregate results indicate significant insights. The temporal development of average levels of openness and economic efficiency is illustrated in the following graph.

The data reveal differing dynamics between openness and economic efficiency in Slovak local self-governments from 2010 to 2022. Economic efficiency, reflecting financial stability and operational effectiveness, started at 55.34% in 2010 and grew significantly to a peak of 75.46% by 2016. This improvement suggests gradual enhancements in financial governance, likely supported by reforms and more effective public financial management. However, after 2016, economic efficiency slightly declined, reaching 70.29% in 2022, which, while still over 15% higher than in 2010, may signal emerging economic challenges within the sample.

Openness, representing transparency and citizen participation, demonstrated a stable and continuous increase over the entire period. From a baseline of 39.91% in 2010, it rose to 63.18% in 2022. The most significant year-

over-year jump occurred between 2010 and 2012, with openness increasing by 9.55%, marking the largest annual change during the observed period.

Graph 1. Temporal Development of Average Openness and Economic Efficiency



Source: Own calculation.

At the beginning of the observed period, there was a significant disparity between the two variables: in 2010, economic efficiency was 15.43% higher than openness. Over time, this gap narrowed, and by 2022, the disparity decreased to 7.11%, reflecting a harmonization of economic efficiency and open governance principles. The most recent data demonstrate a long-term increase in openness alongside stagnation or a slight decline in economic efficiency since 2016.

Overall, both indicators showed positive developments relative to their baseline values, gradually converging and reducing disparities between economic efficiency and openness.

The final correlation coefficient of 0.71 indicates a strong positive linear relationship between the two variables (economic efficiency and openness) among the Slovak local self-governments studied. This suggests that higher levels of openness are associated with higher levels of economic efficiency. However, it is crucial to note that the correlation coefficient does not imply causation but rather points to a significant shared trend between the variables.

In the context of the data, this means that more open local self-governments tend to achieve better results in the efficient and purposeful use of public resources. This relationship may be influenced by various factors, such as legislative requirements for openness, the publication of contracts, public participation in decision-making processes, or control mechanisms facilitated by openness.

Table 3. Average Annual Levels of Openness and Economic Efficiency

| Year                    | Economic Efficiency | Openness |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------|
| 2010                    | 55,34%              | 39,91%   |
| 2012                    | 67,03%              | 49,46%   |
| 2014                    | 69,05%              | 47,39%   |
| 2016                    | 75,46%              | 51,50%   |
| 2018                    | 74,40%              | 57,34%   |
| 2022                    | 70,29%              | 63,18%   |
| Average                 | 68,59%              | 51,46%   |
| Correlation Coefficient | 0,71                |          |

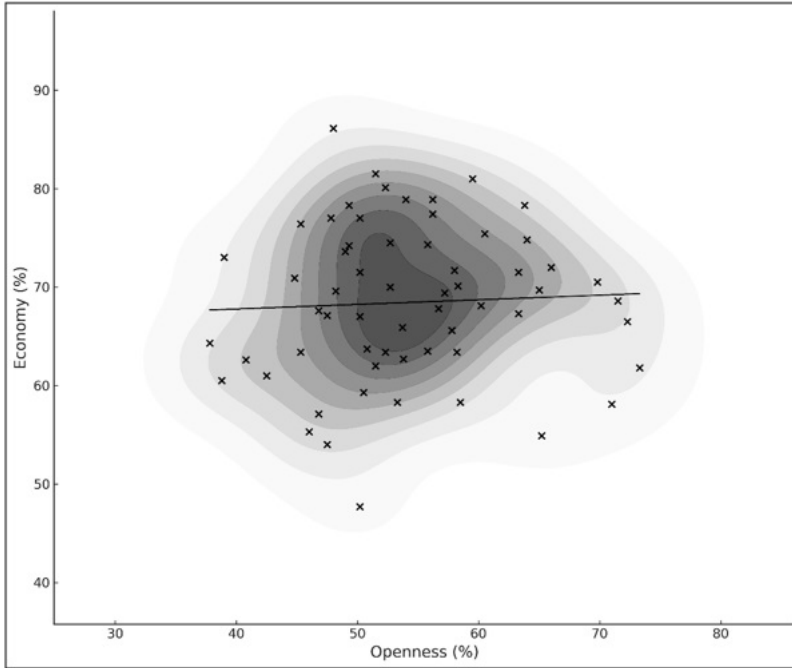
Source: Own calculation.

The correlation coefficient of 0.71 falls into the category of strong positive correlation, indicating a significant and systematic relationship between economic efficiency and openness. In statistical terms, values close to 1 are considered strong, and a coefficient of 0.71 is sufficiently high to signify a meaningful connection between these variables. This result demonstrates that changes in one variable are consistently associated with changes in the other to a considerable extent. While the correlation does not establish causation, its strength suggests that economic efficiency and openness are highly interlinked. In the social sciences, where extremely high correlations are rare, a coefficient of 0.71 is an exceptionally strong indicator of the relationship between these two key aspects of local governance.

The strong positive correlation supports the hypothesis that open processes reduce the risk of corruption, improve citizen trust, and facilitate more efficient management of public finances. Furthermore, efficient resource management may create opportunities to enhance openness through investments in modern technologies for information disclosure and public participation. However, further research is needed to determine whether this is a direct causal relationship or if both variables are influenced by other common factors, such as governance quality or political participation in specific municipalities. The correlation coefficient of 0.71 thus provides valuable insights into the relationship between openness and economic efficiency, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to improving both areas.

The following graph visualizes the distribution density of the average values of openness and economic efficiency among Slovak local self-government. Darker areas indicate higher concentrations of values. Most data points fall within openness ranges of 45% to 65% and economic efficiency ranges of 60% to 75%, reflecting relatively homogeneous behavior among municipalities with some variability in openness.

Graph 2. Distribution Density of Average Data in the Research Sample



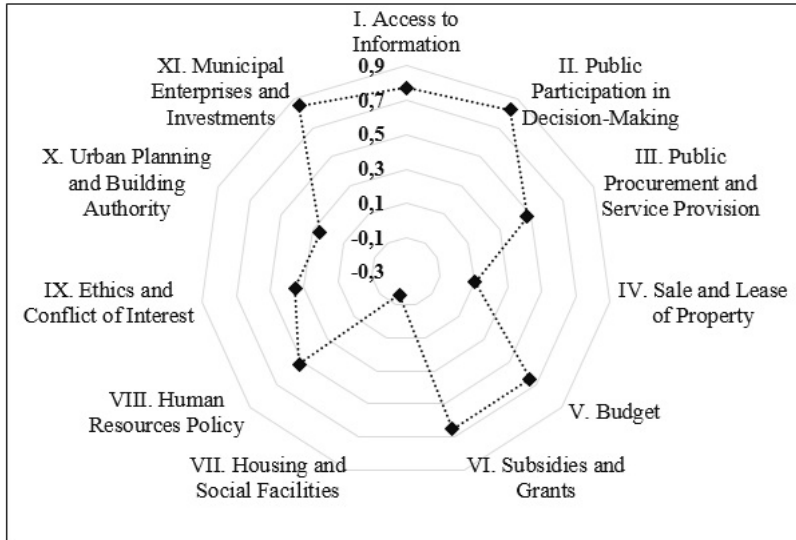
Source: Own calculation.

The line in the center of the graph represents the regression line, modeling the linear relationship between openness and economic efficiency. The slope of this line confirms the positive association between these variables, where increasing levels of openness correlate with rising economic efficiency. This relationship aligns with the calculated correlation coefficient of 0.71, indicating a strong positive linear correlation. The regression line illustrates the average trend between the variables, suggesting that more open municipalities tend to manage public resources more efficiently.

From a scientific perspective, the graph supports the hypothesis that openness, as one of the key indicators of good governance, can be an important factor in enhancing the economic efficiency of local self-government. The dispersion of data points around the regression line suggests that while some municipalities deviate from this trend, the overall results reinforce the strong connection between the studied variables. Such findings are highly relevant for discussions on policies aimed at increasing openness and its impact on the efficiency of public administration.

The breakdown of aggregate correlation values by openness subcategories yields significant insights. Correlation coefficients between individual subcategories of openness and overall economic efficiency provide a detailed view of the relationship within these domains.

Graph 3. Primary Correlation Coefficients of Openness and Economic Efficiency



Source: Own calculation.

The highest correlation was found in Area XI: Municipal Enterprises and Investments, with a coefficient of 0.851, indicating a very strong positive relationship. This suggests that openness in managing municipal enterprises and investments significantly influences economic efficiency, likely due to more effective management reducing resource waste.

The second strongest area was Area II: Public Participation in Decision-Making, with a correlation of 0.821, also reflecting a very strong positive relationship. This indicates that active citizen involvement in decision-making processes likely fosters more responsible and efficient use of public resources.

Area I: Access to Information followed with a correlation of 0.773, showing a strong and above-average positive relationship. Access to information serves as a fundamental tool for openness, enabling public oversight, reducing the risk of inefficient decisions, and enhancing the accountability of local representatives.

Other areas, such as Area V: Budget (0.651) and Area VI: Subsidies and Grants (0.653), demonstrated moderately strong positive correlations. These results indicate that openness in these areas significantly contributes to economic efficiency by enabling better planning and oversight of resource allocation.

Subcategories with below-average but still positive correlations included Area VIII: Personnel Policy (0.523), Area IX: Ethics and Conflict of Interest (0.351), and Area X: Urban Planning and Building Authority (0.250). While the openness in these areas shows a weaker relationship with economic efficiency, it still provides some benefits, likely linked to specific processes indirectly influencing resource management.

Conversely, Area IV: Sale and Lease of Property exhibited a very weak positive correlation (0.106), suggesting minimal impact on economic efficiency. The lowest correlation, and even a negative relationship, was observed in Area VII: Housing and Social Facilities, with a coefficient of -0.162. This may be interpreted as an area influenced more by social and political factors than by economic efficiency.

These partial results highlight that not all aspects of openness have the same impact on economic efficiency. Key areas to strengthen for improving resource use efficiency include municipal enterprises, public participation, and access to information. On the other hand, areas like housing and social facilities or the sale of property require a more nuanced approach to better understand their relationship with economic efficiency.

## CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of this research lies in its integration of two often separately studied areas—openness and economic efficiency, analyzed through a sample of 100 local self-governments in Slovakia. Such an analysis has not been conducted in detail before, offering a novel perspective on improving municipal management through increased openness.

The study confirmed a strong positive correlation (correlation coefficient of 0.71) between the openness of local self-governments and their economic efficiency. More open municipalities utilize public resources more economically, with key areas being the management of municipal enterprises and investments, public participation in decision-making, and access to information. These dimensions help reduce resource wastage and enhance the quality of public governance.

One limitation of the research is the inability of correlation analysis to determine causal relationships. Future studies should explore causality and examine specific dimensions of openness in greater detail to assess their unique impacts on economic efficiency. Expanding the research to include smaller municipalities and comparisons with international local governments could provide further valuable insights.

These findings provide a significant foundation for developing policies that promote openness as a tool for improving economic efficiency and strengthening public trust in governance. The results highlight the need for further research to identify the most effective strategies to enhance both openness and economic efficiency in municipal management

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## **SLOVÁK, P. (2024). SOCIÁLNA PRÁCA A JEJ METAMORFÓZY V PRAXI**

Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 130 pp. ISBN 978-80-572-0432-9.

Social work is one of the disciplines that is important for the development of social justice and well-being in every society. In addition to the ever-present economic inequalities, the last years have also brought a global pandemic, military conflict and many technological changes associated with cyber security threats, making this area increasingly important. Modern society is also characterized by dynamic changes in terms of social work that affect the lives of at-risk individuals and marginalized groups. Social work must therefore respond to these changes and adapt its approaches to new challenges. Social work touches on many aspects of life and society and requires a high level of empathy, combined with professional knowledge and the ability to resolve conflict situations. In addition to helping individuals, social work is also important from the perspective of maintaining stability and balance in society. Given the growing complexity of social challenges, it is essential to address this area and support its development, to which this scientific monograph titled *Social Work and its Metamorphoses in Practice* certainly contributes.

This monograph consists of 18 separate chapters, where the author describes specific topics that contemporary social work regularly deals with. Hence, it provides a comprehensive overview of the areas and topics that a future aspiring social worker will encounter during their or her career, brief characteristics of these topics and their specifics. Within these 18 chapters, in addition to the description of a specific issue and the presentation of its unique attributes, the reader will also find topics for reflection and discussion, which encourage the reader to further reflect on the lines read, or to investigate appropriately selected publications that the author utilised when writing this monograph.

The first chapter discusses the importance of social work in addressing CAN syndrome (Child Abuse and Neglect), which includes physical, psycho-

logical, sexual abuse, and neglect of children, the consequences of which can last a lifetime. In the second chapter, we read that mental health is an integral part of a person's overall health, while stress, anxiety, and unresolved conflicts can significantly affect their balance - especially in the current era marked by post-COVID conditions. The third chapter focuses on the existential dimension of social work and emphasizes that the foundation of social work is to help people find the meaning of life. According to Frankl's theory, suffering has the potential to become an impulse for personal growth, creativity and a reassessment of life priorities. As the author further explains, existential analysis and logotherapy represent effective approaches not only in psychotherapy, but also in social work. In the fourth chapter, the author views older age as a period full of paradoxes, where seniority is associated with increasing vulnerability and the need to maintain autonomy. Social services and facilities for seniors play a key role in this context and provide not only professional care, but also psychosocial support. The author also mentions the trend of home care, which allows seniors to remain in their familiar environment, thereby strengthening their physical and mental health, as well as the modern tool represented by a senior phone line, which offers immediate help, empathetic listening and spiritual encouragement, alleviating loneliness and promoting social cohesion. The fifth chapter points out the fact that social work plays a key role in increasing the quality of life and personal growth of people with disabilities. Included stories of two women demonstrate how a diagnosis can be faced with determination and adaptation, but also points out the persistent barriers that make it difficult for similar people to be independent and fully participate within society. The following chapter is devoted to the institute of professional parenting, where children from difficult backgrounds or dysfunctional families gain the opportunity to live in a substitute family environment. The author emphasizes that being a professional foster parent is noble and responsible area of social work, requiring personal sacrifices and a high level of empathy. This chapter also describes a current legislative framework of centres for children and families, which provide temporary care and support to children until they become independent. Next chapter is devoted to social work with clients with mental disorders, while discussing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in detail, as well as Alzheimer's disease as the most widespread type of dementia, which mainly affects the senior population. Social work plays a key role here, providing multidisciplinary support, which is often combined with support by NGOs and civic associations, for example. In the eighth chapter, the author addresses the significant physical, psychological, and spiritual burdens coming with the terminal phase of life. As discussed in this chapter, palliative care, especially through mobile hospice, provides clients and their families with multidisciplinary assistance directly in the home environment, allowing them to live out their remaining days with dignity. The author

emphasizes not only medical and nursing care, but also respect for spiritual needs and sensitive communication, which helps maintain the quality of life in the last days.

The ninth chapter is devoted to mental and behavioural disorders, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and preventive measures in social work. The author describes eating disorders, behavioural disorders including ADHD, but also cyberbullying as a modern form of digital bullying that abuses the anonymity of the online space and can cause serious psychological trauma as well. In the following section, the author describes social work within the issue of homelessness, which requires theoretical, factual, and practical knowledge, while the success of resocialization depends on several factors. Many of the challenges of homeless shelters lie within a limited room and funding, which can be considered a future challenge for public administration and public funding. The eleventh chapter focuses on social work with people with Down syndrome, which brings not only specific health challenges, but also demands for constant care, which significantly affects the lives of their families. In this context, the author highlights the work of the NGO Down Syndrome Society (Spoločnosť Downovho syndrómu), which helps to change the social perception of this disorder and supports successful integration of affected people in the field of sports, arts and education. The next chapter states that an important element of social work is not only education about hygiene and prevention, but also dissemination of knowledge about important awareness campaigns, such as those organized by the Slovak Red Cross (Slovenský Červený kríž). In chapter thirteen, we find an overview of social work with people affected by sensory disabilities, where the author emphasizes the need for integration and unconditional acceptance of people with visual impairments, introduces the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Slovakia NGO (Únia nevidiacich a slabozrakých Slovenska) in the field of education, and points out the importance of compensating for vision loss through guide and assistance dogs. Chapter fourteen emphasizes that ecology and social work are inseparable, with man and his environment forming a single whole. The text draws attention to the problem of climate anxiety, which arises from a feeling of helplessness in the face of climate change and underlines the need for education in this area. Chapter fifteen appeals to the need to improve the financial competence of many individuals, since insufficient financial literacy often leads to debts and subsequent complications, therefore this area should be an integral part of modern social work. In the following chapter, the author points out the key role of charity centres, which provide accommodation and support for the integration of refugees into society through material and social assistance. It critically assesses the gradual weakening of the initial solidarity, while drawing attention to social tensions and discussions about positive discrimination, which complicate the process of inclusion. The penultimate chapter deals with autism, emphasizing

the need for an individual and multidisciplinary approach in social work, where the author cites the DEMY centre as an example of effective practice, where specialized educators use a wide range of modern procedures. The last, eighteenth chapter is dedicated to the limited competencies of midwives in the Slovak Republic, even though they provide invaluable support. The chapter analyses the dilemma between childbirth in the home environment and health facilities, while pointing out the importance of social work in this time of life as well. Finally, it summarizes the historical development of midwifery from traditional midwives to a modern, legislatively defined profession that reflects the need for the humanization of maternity care.

Although after reading the previous lines it may seem that this scientific monograph is from a different field than public administration and public policy, we find direct parallels with this field in several places. The monograph presents the reality from the area of implementation of several laws, since the entire field of social work and the conditions for its performance are governed by legislation, which may have shortcomings in certain aspects. The provision of social services and the powers of social workers in integrating clients into society are therefore directly influenced by legislation. Similarly, in addition to the state administration, the founders of social service facilities are also municipalities, self-governing regions and NGOs, so it is an area that intersects not only with public administration, but also with the non-profit sector. The monograph therefore not only analyses the practical aspects of social work from several perspectives, but also points out how legislation, public administration and public policies (including national programs and specific laws) form the basic framework for the provision of social services. Even in the field of social work, the legal and political context is an integral part of the entire area that the author presents to the reader, and in addition to the need for a multidisciplinary approach, he also points out the necessary connection between theory, legislation and practice.

Thus, paraphrasing and underlining some thoughts from the author's résumé, this scientific monograph highlights the fundamental role of social work in many areas, where it supports human integrity, as well as enables individuals to cope with psychosomatic and social challenges. It emphasizes the necessity of continually updating social work with current professional approaches to ensure its correct functioning. This publication explores how social work interacts with different client groups needing professional intervention, aiming to educate beginners in both social and psychosomatic aspects of this field. Social workers and other professionals play a crucial role in fostering solidarity, responsibility, and a feeling of belonging - especially for vulnerable groups of people affected by various crises. This monograph underscores the importance of trust in addressing social challenges and affirms that social work must transcend individualism

## REVIEWS

through goodwill, generosity, and mutual support. After reading this engaging scientific monograph, we have no other choice but to agree and recommend this text to all readers interested in exploring the field of social work.

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León Richvalský  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava  
Bučianska 4/A, Trnava, 917 01, Slovakia  
leon.richvalsky@ucm.sk  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3592-5495>

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Faculty of Social Sciences University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava

Department of Political Sciences

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*Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava  
Bučianska 4/A, 917 01 Trnava, Slovakia  
sjpppa.fsvucm.sk*

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