

Enablers of Participatory Budgeting in Slovakia During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In Slovakia, participatory budgeting represents one of the relatively new instruments of political participation. It has been used since 2011. Currently it is present on both levels of territorial self-government (i.e., local level and regional level). Nevertheless, its implementation into practice is only a gradual one, as the number of local and regional governments using participatory budgeting is limited. Furthermore, both local and regional governments are currently exposed to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, so a question arises as to how they managed to deal with the situation and how it affected the implementation of approved participatory budgets. The aim of this paper is to identify how the local governments in Slovakia approached the implementation of participatory budgeting in 2020. With regard to the above-mentioned goal, we focus on the following: the implementation of participatory budgeting before 2020, its continuation in 2020 and, if maintained, its adjustment to the "period of social distancing". The findings show that there is a large group of local and regional governments that have decided to either suspend or cancel the implementation of participatory budgeting. Out of those who opted for its implementation, one group did not need to significantly adapt to the distancing restrictions, another group managed to hold potential meetings before the first restrictions came into force. It was only the latter group that faced the most serious challenge. However, active employment of online tools along with the use of the period of released measures proved crucial for the implementation of participatory budgeting.

Keywords

Participatory budgeting, Local governments, Regional governments, Slovakia, COVID-19 pandemic

JEL Classification

D72, H72

Introduction

As several experts (e.g., Juza, 2019) point out, one of the important conditions for the sustainability of current democracies is the political and civic involvement of their population. The existence of active and participating citizens is in our opinion an inevitable part of this category. The significance of their engagement, in specific cases reflected in regular "cooperation", is within local governments impacting daily life of an individual and their environment on the increase. In recent years, the concept of political participation has been expanding. It means that several traditional instruments have undergone a process of "modernization" (e.g., petition - e-petition), however, at the same time there are new ways of involving individuals as well as groups (communities) in the community or local decision-making processes. Participatory budgeting belongs to the second of the above-mentioned categories.

A relatively "standard" functioning of societies was disrupted in 2020. It brought about the circumstances significantly affecting the functioning of all countries in the world, including Slovakia. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected daily lives of their citizens and changed the regular patterns of behaviour, practices, and processes. At the same time, it impacted the economic side of life. National as well as sub-national governments had to deal with a loss of income on the one hand and increase in costs in some specific areas on the other. Therefore, also as a result of the above facts, the question arises as to how these circumstances affected the participatory budgeting of the local governments in Slovakia. We proceed from the work of Murray Svidroňová and Klimovský (forthcoming) who estimated that the majority of participatory budgeting initiatives in Slovakia in 2020 were suspended by the local governments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, the aim of the paper is to

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find out how the local governments handled the implementation of participatory budgeting in 2020 as well as to identify possible elements and settings enabling its implementation in those local governments that decided to not suspend its implementation. In order to achieve this goal, we focus mainly on identifying those local governments that have suspended their participatory budgeting initiatives and then those that have continued in their implementation. Subsequently, in the case of those that maintained their participatory budgeting in operation, we monitor the manner in which the local governments managed the situation. It is worth noting that this phenomenon may be viewed both with regard to economic attributes as well as with regard to the models that contributed to the requirement linked with the "social distancing". The article focuses mainly on the second category, which contains barriers to the participation. For the above reason, the main focus is on the phases leading to the approval of proposed projects (including the approval phase itself). At the same time, this paper does not explore the barriers as such, but the elements that proved instrumental for the local governments to continue with the implementation of participatory budgeting. The restrictions related to physical meetings were among the reasons used to justify the suspension of participatory budgeting. Therefore we try to observe, if this reason presented an unsolvable problem for the individual phases of the process.

Literature Review

Participatory budgeting is a relatively new phenomenon, which, since the beginning of the second millennium, has become a subject of hundreds of studies (Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke, 2008; Krenjova and Raudla, 2013; Peixoto, 2008; Cabannes, 2004; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2015; Wampler, 2007; Minárik, 2020, etc.). These studies were carried out in various countries since the popularization of this instrument contributed to its expansion into different parts of the world. Since its start at the end of 80s in Porto Alegre, the participatory budgeting has been applied in Africa, Asia as well as North America. Local governments in Europe have embraced it to such extent that one third of all participatory budgeting initiatives worldwide is being implemented in this part of the world (Dias et al., 2019).

The experts were thus given an opportunity to deal with its implementation at various political or administrative levels and in different cultural settings worldwide. For example, the research has attempted to refine its theoretical understanding based on common characteristics in its implementation (Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke, 2008). On the other side, based on diverse elements in different cultures, there are attempts to understand the concept in the context of different societies. The differences can be found, for example, between the original participatory budgeting initiative in Porto Alegre and its European variants. But the European variants are heterogeneous, and they offer clearly different experience (Krenjova and Raudla, 2013). Research has also focused on the limitations of participatory budgeting (e.g., Wampler, 2007), the forms of their implementation (e.g., Peixoto, 2008), individual processes (e.g., Marquetti, 2000) or their impacts on public development and their effect on the theoretically predetermined goals (e.g., Cabannes, 2004; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2015).

A similar situation is in the context of Slovak research, where this subject has been studied by several scholars. From the methodological perspective, some of them opted for a case study (e.g., Brutovská and Hrehová, 2019; Hrabínová, 2020; Brix, 2018), however, there are also studies that focused on selected issues such as legislation, experience of individual local governments, the role of public sector or participatory budgeting models applied in Slovakia (e.g., Čunderlík, 2015; Murray Svidroňová and Gondášová, 2016; Székely, 2014; Brutovská and Marošiová, 2020) as well as comparative international studies (Džinić, Murray Svidroňová and Markowska-Bzducha, 2016). Furthermore, there are several practice-oriented works on the participatory budgeting in the Slovak context aimed at providing guidance for the practical implementation of participatory budgeting or the promotion of relevant knowledge and the examples of good practice (Hrabínová et al. 2020; Klimovský and Gašparík, 2020). Participatory budgeting strengths and weaknesses were analysed separately in the SWOT analysis of the Slovak participatory budgets by Cevarová (2020).

The analysis of already mentioned limits constitutes another opportunity for further research development in the Slovak context. Participatory budgeting has demonstrated high capability of dissemination and adaptation across different cultures worldwide. Therefore, a question arises as to the limitations of this popular instrument that would render it impossible to apply. Equally interesting is the perspective of the local governments that tried to use it but have later modified or entirely suspended its use. Based on the research already carried out it (e.g., Krenjova and Raudla, 2013) can be observed that there are several limitations in the essence of the participatory budgeting that determine its functioning. In the European context, this instrument is sometimes used as a space for presentation of city officials or a city as a whole. Its heading towards real civil engagement is questionable, to say the least. Equally questionable is its potential to evolve in case it continues to be based on a strict top-down initiative without any opposing bottom-up engagement.

Political participation as such is characterized by the existence of several barriers. This problem is pointed out in a broad group of studies observing that these barriers may follow from political limitations such as the lack of consensus between political elites, fear of public opinion or civic limitations such as the lack of possibilities to participate, costs of participation (Kathlene and Martin, 1991). In Slovakia, the lack of possibilities was also analysed by Plichtová and Šestaková (2019), who defined the relation between active participation and the

options of citizen's participation open on the local level. If we focus on participatory budgeting, there is a number of barriers in terms of material and technical requirements that are inevitable during the individual phases of the entire implementation process. According to some scholars, participatory budgeting is fundamentally dependent on the political will, not only in terms of political shielding necessary for its implementation, but also in terms of individual actions inherent in it (Wampler, 2007). Equally, the active participation of citizens, which is a prerequisite for the success of the whole participatory budgeting process, is a long-term challenge not only in the post-communist countries. Another determinant the participatory process fundamentally depends on is sufficient funding. Local governments solely "surviving" on operating expenses have objectively fewer opportunities for the successful introduction and sustainable implementation of participatory budgeting.

The period of economic crisis constitutes a threat to the participatory budgeting due to the loss of income, high level of uncertainty, as well as due to the rise of social moods that may potentially oppose the processes of participatory democracy. This threat comes either directly, as a reduction of the revenues of the institutions that carry out such processes (Krenjova and Raudla, 2013), or indirectly, as an increase in the influence of right-wing movements publicly demonstrating their anti-democratic and authoritarian ambitions (della Porta, 2018). However, the studies of some scholars suggest that theoretically the threat associated with the onset of anti-democratic ambitions may constitute a danger to the participatory processes, but on the other hand there are pro-democratic forces in power that have opposite tendencies and that may contribute to the proliferation of these instruments in the post-crisis period (Wimmer, Tambouris and Macintosh, 2013). In their efforts to regain trust, democratic leaders respond to anti-democratic sentiments by expanding civil engagement. From the point of view of further research, it is interesting to look at the financial crisis as a limit following from the restricted funds of the local governments.

Methods

The paper focuses on the use of participatory budgeting by the local governments in Slovakia in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This period caused shortfalls in income tax yield, which represents a substantial part of the local government budget in Slovakia (Ministry of Finance, 2020). At the same time, this period witnessed the introduction of multiple social distancing and stay-at-home policies that continued to change and resulted in the restrictions related to the mobility and physical contact of individuals (Ministry of Health, 2021). Thus, the aim of the paper is to characterize the manner in which local governments approached and managed the implementation of participatory budgeting under such circumstances. The importance of each local government being analysed individually is amplified by the lack of legal regulations in Slovakia providing for the participatory budgeting and its implementation. For this reason, no accurate expectations as to how would Slovak regional and local elites react to pandemic situation were possible.

With regard to the above goal, the paper aims to answer the following two research questions: The first research question follows from the observations of Murray Svidroňová and Klimovský (forthcoming). In this connection we ask: *How did local governments approach the implementation of participatory budgeting during 2020?* The second question is: *What were probable enablers of the participatory budgeting in the Slovak local governments during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

In order to achieve the mentioned goal and answer the above questions, the collected data were accessed at the official websites of local governments, alternatively at the websites dedicated directly to participatory budgeting, in the official documents of local governments, their informative publications as well as their other official communication tools (e.g., Facebook pages). The regulatory documents of the respective local governments stipulating the rules of the participatory budgeting implementation constitute an important resource as well. Therefore, in this case it is possible to speak of a process based on the examination of documents (Hendl, 2005) and all above resources may be deemed documents used for this purpose. At the same time, we monitor four groups of public authorities: regional governments, local governments of the cities that are centres of counties, local governments of city districts in the case of Bratislava and Košice, and other local governments with the town status. The last group is the most heterogeneous, but we focused only on those, where participatory budgeting was either introduced in recent past or its implementation was initially planned for 2020. We proceed from the document of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (Zoznam samospráv, ktoré deklarujú, že občanom..., 2020) and the study by Garaj and Bardovič (2020). An additional data source is represented by the online questionnaire sent by e-mail with one open question as follows: *Several municipalities suspended the implementation of participatory budgeting during the pandemic year of 2020. Could you please briefly specify what has contributed (e.g., conditions, circumstances, implementation model) to the fact that your local government managed to maintain this budgetary instrument during 2020 and bring it to a successful end?* The respondents in this case were only those local governments that were on the basis of a previous survey identified as those that did not suspend the implementation of participatory budgeting in 2020. The local governments, where it was not clear whether the participatory budgeting implementation took place in 2020 or not, were addressed separately as well. In this case, the questionnaire was complemented by an introductory (filtering) question: *Has your local government managed to implement the participatory budgeting planned for 2020?*

In the next phase, the collected data are processed and compared. The aim of synchronous comparison is to identify similarities and differences in the approaches of the defined public authorities, with regard to the following three criteria: the implementation of participatory budgeting before 2020, the planned implementation of participatory budgeting in 2020 and, in the case of its implementation, the management of the constraints following from the COVID-19 pandemic. The last criterion monitors the process; whether or not it took place up until the announcement of results, or, in the case of available information, whether the approved projects were implemented as well.

It should be noted that in the case of implemented participatory budgeting initiatives, it is not always possible to verify the implementation of the projects themselves, as this information may not be published yet or due to time limitation we have not received a response from the local government itself. Moreover, within their two-year cycle some local governments shall shift to the project implementation phase in 2021. For this reason, such local government is marked as having their participatory budgeting initiative implemented (note: Implementation of PB during 2020 marked „√“), if the projects passed the final evaluation determining their order. These implementation phases potentially contain the most important citizen participation elements, and the COVID-19 pandemic could significantly complicate their course and probable implementation. Only in the cases, where the data are currently available, we provide the information on the non-implementation of project (marked „√/X“) as well.

Results

Self-government units at the regional level were introduced in Slovakia within a public administration reform in 2001. The country territory is divided into eight regions nowadays. The most important bodies of regional governments are directly elected chairmen and regional councils. The municipalities in Slovakia are very fragmented. Two thirds out of 2,890 municipalities are very small and their population size is less than 1,000 inhabitants. Approximately half of the country population lives in less than 3% of the largest cities or towns. No categorization according to their size or capacity has been introduced yet, and therefore the smallest municipalities and the largest cities have to deliver the same services. Local governments consist of two main bodies, namely mayors and local councils, whereby the mayor's position is stronger but balanced by the decision making powers of the council. Thanks to decentralization approaches of some central governments in the past, the local governments are strong in terms of their responsibilities but their capacities remain quite limited in many cases. In Slovakia, the right to self-government at the local level is constitutionally anchored and local inhabitants have numerous rights that allow or entitle them to take part in local policy making (Klimovský and Nemeč, 2021). Surprisingly, participatory budgeting has not been legally regulated yet, therefore for many local governments it is still rather an innovation of experimental nature than a verified practical instrument, which would help them to follow some strategic vision.

Table 1. The participatory budgeting implementation by regional governments in Slovakia

Regional government	Implementation of PB before 2020	Planned implementation of PB in 2020	Implementation of PB during 2020
Trnava Region	√	√	√
Trenčín Region	√	√	X
Žilina Region	√	√	X
Bratislava Region	√	X*	X*

*Information about initiation of participatory budgeting process unpublished in 2020

Source: Own processing based on official documents.

In the recent years, participatory budgeting has found its place at the level of regional governments as well. As we can see, from the total number of eight regional governments, participatory budgeting initiatives have so far been implemented in four of them. Based on the published information it can be noted that three of them planned to open a new cycle of participatory budgeting in 2020 as well. In two cases, however, this decision was revoked due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the case of Žilina Region it has been justified by economic reasons. In 2020, they planned to spend EUR 200,000 (Trenčín Region) or EUR 195,000 (Žilina Region) for this purpose. Out of the mentioned regions, Trnava Region was the only one that handled the situation despite the fact that their model of participatory budgeting stipulates that the citizens are involved in the whole process directly through public meetings and through voting. One of the solutions applied in the Trnava Region was a shift to a two-year cycle that followed from a brief suspension of the process. This important change was adopted only in its course. In certain respect this step resolved the issue of "time pressure" and created conditions for physical meetings, since public meetings were postponed to the period of relaxed measures, when the participants could meet. However, the regional government also managed to handle the gradually deteriorating situation by having

planned meetings due to deliberation switched to written communication. And since the final vote is carried out electronically, this potential barrier to participation at this stage has been in certain respect addressed.

In the case of cities that are the county centres, it is possible to note that four out of eight of them have already experienced participatory budgeting. Overall, the capital city of Bratislava offers the least available information on its civil budget (the name determined by the city). The official site did not provide any record of a call for 2020 that would start in the given year and that would be linked to the phases of project submission and approval. Trnava belongs with its participatory budgeting initiative to those local governments that actively involve their inhabitants in the process of project creation and decision-making through public meetings, deliberative elements, and voting. In 2020, the local government of Trnava decided to suspend the budget and justified it by both monitored limits of its implementation - the problem with meetings as well as financial consequences of the pandemic. The other two county centres employing this participation instrument (Nitra and Banská Bystrica) managed to bring its implementation into the final phase, i.e., the final decision on projects. In the case of Nitra, it should be noted that their participatory budgeting model does not include the elements that would require active citizen meetings, as is the case of Trnava. The introductory meeting, being of a more informative nature, took place before the outbreak of the pandemic. Subsequently, the voting itself, based on online voting, could be arranged, given its nature, also in the period of strict social distancing. The opposite case is offered by Banská Bystrica since it involves its inhabitants in the process to a greater extent: through meetings or discussion forums. Those scheduled for the beginning of 2020 took place in standard mode. The understandable interruption occurred at the time of the first pandemic restrictions, but the local government of the city took an active approach and the meetings that followed took place at the time of the relaxed measures. However, the meetings were accompanied by the need to register in order for the city to ensure the space large enough to keep the required distance. In the period of closed office the meeting was held outdoors. When the epidemiological situation deteriorated, the final presentation of projects took place via live broadcast on the Facebook page: *Participatívny rozpočet Banská Bystrica* (individual projects were presented in separate videos), with the possibility to ask questions. Subsequently, the voting of the project proposers took place without the need to meet physically. In the end, the local government took advantage of the repeated relaxation of measures at the end of the year and its citizens could vote in person. Therefore, Banská Bystrica responded actively in this regard and, if the need arose, switched to the online environment. As noted below in the table, despite the fact that the local government managed to deal with such an obstacle, in the city's response to our question the current financial reasons have prevented them (so far) from the possibility to implement the approved projects. It also affected the participatory budgeting initiative of the last year.

Table 2. The participatory budgeting implementation in the county centres in Slovakia

Regional City	Implementation of PB before 2020	Planned implementation of PB in 2020	Implementation of PB during 2020
Trnava	✓	✓	X
Banská Bystrica	✓	✓	✓/X
Nitra	✓	✓	✓
Bratislava	✓	X*	X*

*Initiated in 2019 (a two-year cycle); the new call for 2020 has not been published.

Source: Own processing based on official documents.

Participatory budgeting has not been introduced at the city level of Košice, the second largest city of Slovakia. Nevertheless, it has already occurred at the level of its city districts, more precisely in Košice-Západ. Two city districts (out of 22 city districts of Košice) declared their readiness to implement participatory budgeting at the beginning of 2020. While Košice-Západ had some previous experience with this instrument, Košice-KVP launched a pilot year of participatory budgeting. There are certain specifics that may be found in the mutual comparison of the two mentioned districts. In its model, Košice-KVP assumes active meetings of its citizens, even the opportunity to present their ideas. However, these could not have taken place. Nevertheless, Košice-KVP has not suspended the implementation of participatory budgeting. The scheduled meetings were cancelled, but as soon as it was possible, the city district and its representatives (along with the mayor) went to public forums and tried to introduce the budget to the citizens by way of its presentation. The projects and assignments were possible to be submitted online, voting too was carried out online, i.e., there were no restrictions in this model. The projects themselves were presented online, i.e., the communication moved partially to e-space. In addition to that, the city district used its local periodical for the presentation. One of the enablers identified directly by the local government allowing it to implement participatory budget in this part of the city was the specification of a two-year cycle, which means that the implementation of projects is planned for 2021.

The participatory budgeting model of Košice-Západ defines direct meetings of the citizens to a lesser extent, ultimately mainly for the presentation of projects. This combined with the fact that the declared presentation of projects as well as their submission and voting was carried out through online tools meant that the city district did

not encounter major barriers to the implementation of participatory budget with regard to meeting restrictions. Moreover, as their answer to the question demonstrates, they still plan to implement the approved projects, which means that even the economic side did not result in the disruption of the process.

The citizens of Bratislava have experienced participatory budgeting at the level of the region, city as well as some city districts. Out of the city districts, with regard to participatory budgeting, Bratislava-Nové Mesto is probably the most experienced city district, where the elements such as deliberation or public meetings are functional as well. Out of the total number of 17 city districts of the capital, the participatory budgeting was used in the past in seven, while five (in the case of Bratislava-Rača it was supposed to be a pilot year) had planned its implementation in some form for 2020 - either as a call or at least as an item in the budget approved for 2020. In the end, however, only three proceeded with its implementation¹. In one case (Bratislava-Vrakuňa), however, the voting results are not currently available online. In the case of another local government (Bratislava-Vajnory) we were informed that there was no project implemented in 2020.

According to the available information, Bratislava-Vrakuňa managed to implement entire process up until voting as well as subsequently implement several selected projects. This means that the process itself was not disrupted in any significant way. Moreover, the model itself does not anticipate public meetings. Likewise, the submission of proposals and the voting itself can be performed online or in person. In this case, the local government did not encounter any barriers to implementation following from the restriction of social contact. Similar model without the need for mutual meetings exists in Bratislava-Vajnory. Likewise, the submission of proposals and the voting itself can be performed online as well as in person and by mail. Bratislava-Rusovce carries out their participatory budgeting with no public meetings as well. There is a working group composed of citizens, however, in this case it is not possible to talk about a bottom-up initiative, as it is approved by the council based on the mayor's proposal. As for the last year, even voting did not take place, since only one project entered the final phase. As a result, it was approved by the local council. The only theoretical obstacles to implementation may have arisen at the meetings of the project proposers and working groups. However, the meetings took place mainly before the start of the pandemic. It should be noted that Bratislava-Rusovce has not initiated any new call for 2020/2021, which means they would miss one planned year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite that, in the table it has been listed in the category of the local governments that implemented their participatory budgeting, because they managed to implement several phases (up until the process of approval) from the call of 2019-2020 in 2020.

Table 3. The participatory budgeting implementation in selected city districts of two largest cities in Slovakia (Košice and Bratislava)

City districts	Implementation of PB before 2020	Planned implementation of PB in 2020	Implementation of PB during 2020
Košice			
Košice-Západ	✓	✓	✓
Košice-KVP	X	✓	✓
Bratislava			
Rusovce	✓	✓***	✓***
Záhorská Bystrica	✓	X	X
Lamač	✓	✓	X
Vajnory	✓	✓	✓/X
Petržalka	✓	X	X
Rača	X	✓	X
Nové Mesto	✓	X**	X**
Vrakuňa	✓	✓	✓*

*The results of voting have not been published, but the selected feasible projects were implemented.

**The local government has published a participatory budgeting marked 2020, but the approval process was carried out during 2019 and no new call was found.

***The local government uses a two-year cycle; the new call for 2020/2021 has not been initiated.

Source: Own processing based on official documents.

¹ Bratislava Nové Mesto is not included since there is no information published on their participatory budgeting official website of pr.banm.sk.

If we move to other towns, it can be said that 39 out of the total number of 133 made use of the participatory budgeting either in the current period or in the past. 33 of them planned a new call for 2020. However, this does not mean that other towns failed to have this element present at all. Some towns, e.g. Prievidza, use a two-year implementation cycle, i.e. the implementation of the projects themselves was planned within a defined schedule.

Table 4. The participatory budgeting implementation in selected towns in Slovakia

Town	Implementation of PB before 2020	Planned implementation of PB in 2020	Implementation of PB during 2020
Svätý Jur	✓	✓	✓
Nové Mesto nad Váhom	✓	✓	X
Topoľčany	✓	–**	–**
Hlohovec	✓	✓	✓
Krásno nad Kysucou	✓	X	X
Nová Baňa	X	✓	X
Poltár	✓	✓	X
Ružomberok	✓	X	X
Bánovce nad Bebravou	X	✓	X
Hnúšťa	X	✓	✓
Partizánske	✓	✓	X
Pezinok	✓	✓	X
Modra	X	–**	–**
Piešťany	✓	X	X
Lučenec	✓	✓	X
Nové Zámky	✓	✓	✓
Púchov	X	✓	X
Stará Turá	X	✓	X
Veľký Šariš	✓	✓	X
Kežmarok	✓	✓	?*
Snina	X	✓	X
Stará Ľubovňa	✓	✓	X
Levice	X	✓	✓
Liptovský Mikuláš	✓	✓	X
Rimavská Sobota	X	✓	✓
Trebišov	✓	✓	✓/X
Vranov nad Topľou	✓	✓	✓/?
Vysoké Tatry	X	✓	✓
Humenné	X	✓	✓/X
Jelšava	X	✓	?*
Považská Bystrica	✓	✓	X
Prievidza	✓	–**	–**
Spišská Belá	✓	✓	X
Rožňava	✓	✓	X
Senica	✓	✓	✓
Martin	X	✓	✓/X

Svidník	✓	✓	X
Šaľa	✓	✓	X
Trstená	✓	✓	✓

**There is no clear information in the official documents on the implementation and, at the same time, local governments did not respond to the question about the participatory budgeting in 2020 until the article was finished.*

***The implementation of participatory budgeting is linked to a two-year cycle, which means that, for example, the implementation of projects was planned for 2020. So, no new call had to be planned for 2020 or 2020/2021.*

Source: Own processing based on official documents.

Based on the available data, it was possible to identify twelve towns where the participatory budgeting was implemented in 2020 (for five of them it was a pilot year). This category includes those with a closed decision-making phase related to specific projects. However, it is not possible to verify the actual implementation of projects in all cases, but at least in three cases the process was suspended after this phase and the projects were either not implemented or the participatory budgeting itself was officially suspended. This specifically applies to Humenné, Martin and Trebišov. As for Humenné, the approved project is declared to be implemented in 2021. The participatory budgeting process itself was largely implemented before the start of the pandemic. Thus, it was possible to hold a public meeting during February or to vote during March in an online environment as well as in person. Therefore, at this stage, the local government did not encounter barriers preventing the participation of the population. In the case of Martin, they also managed to conclude the voting phase carried out online via wellgiving.sk. However, for financial reasons, the implementation of approved projects was suspended by a decision of the council. Nevertheless, the mayor decided to allow the funding of one project. In the case of Trebišov, the possibility to hold a public meeting made it possible for the real participatory budgeting to start at the end of 2019, when the conditions for a public meeting were still present. Moreover, the voting itself took place in March and also online via wellgiving.sk, so there were no obstacles either. However, the local government of Trebišov suspended any further implementation for financial reasons and to save human resources.

Looking at other towns, there is a relatively "rich" offer of various models of participatory budgeting caused by missing legal provisions regulating participatory budgeting in Slovakia. A relatively "limited" model of participatory budgeting can be seen in towns such as Senica, Trstená, Vysoké Tatry and Svätý Jur. In all four cases, its implementation in 2020 was identified, but it is worth noting that the rules set for participatory budgeting within these towns do not require the active involvement of their citizens and do not envisage public meetings. Therefore, these towns did not face the dilemma of how to implement this instrument in 2020, i.e. at the time of social distancing. Moreover, in their case, the vote of the citizens is not present either, i.e., they are left out of this decision-making, too. Thus, the citizens' "participation" is limited to the project submissions. Similarly, low involvement of citizens is present, for example, in Hnúšťa, which launched its pilot year in 2020. In contrast to the above-mentioned towns, the rules of its participatory budgeting include public meetings. However, due to the insufficient number of submitted projects, there was no public meeting, but an immediate approval process which was in this case carried out without the involvement of the citizens, too.

A few other towns offer examples of greater citizen involvement predefined in their models. In addition to the actual rules of participatory budgeting, Nové Zámky assumes that its citizens participate not only by way of submission of projects and assignments, but also through the meetings of communities and the public, including the public presentations of submitted projects and assignments. With regard to the submitted projects, the evaluation also includes public consideration (20% of the total evaluation), which is combined with the classic public voting (80%) - electronically, via wellgiving.sk. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, public meetings were cancelled. The city thus left this element out and proceeded directly with the voting itself. Levice managed to hold planned public meeting in March, i.e., before the start of the first restrictions. No other public meetings were planned, which means that the next phase of the process (the voting) was carried out online, as well as through wellgiving.sk. Rimavská Sobota implemented participatory budgeting in 2020 as well. Although the model anticipated public meetings and voting in person, the local government managed to deal with these potential obstacles. This was partly because the whole process started at the end of 2019 and the meetings as such could have taken place before social distancing measures entered into force. A personal vote took place after the easing of measures, i.e. in July 2020.

The active involvement of citizens through public meetings was also anticipated in Hlohovec. However, the local government of this town first dealt with the new situation by cancelling the meetings planned for the beginning of the year. In the second half of 2020, when circumstances allowed, the public presentation of projects took place in September. The projects were submitted electronically, and their presentations were also made accessible online on Facebook as well as via the local newspaper. The fact that they had moved to the online environment represented according to the coordinator the reason why the town managed to implement their participatory budgeting even in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specificity of this local government is that even though the voting took place electronically via wellgiving.sk, the local government tried to find a solution for the citizens without an access to the Internet and provided the premises for electronic voting in the local library - the

only condition was to have a mobile phone for the purpose of sending an SMS.

Discussion

The collected data indicate the existence of a numerous and heterogeneous group of local governments that decided to suspend participatory budgeting implementation in 2020. Thus, on the regional level we can identify only one regional government, which proceeded with the implementation of this democratic budgetary innovation. In the case of large cities, there are two of them; however, Banská Bystrica postponed the implementation of the projects also for the previous year. Two city districts of Košice (out of 22 city districts of this city) that planned for the use of participatory budgeting proceeded with its implementation. With regard to 17 city districts of Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, the participatory budgeting was planned to be implemented in five of them. The progress itself could be identified only with the three of them, however, one of them does not list any implemented projects. Other towns offer a very heterogeneous group: not all of them were monitored, only those that were identified as having experienced participatory budgeting in the past or planning a pilot year for 2020. We identified 33 towns that came with the plan to involve their citizens in the decision-making associated with the participatory budgeting for 2020. Out of this group we could list only 13 towns that implemented the entire process up until the phase of decision-making related to the projects. However, at the moment, it is not possible to verify its implementation or funding (or the lack thereof) in all cases. But in three cases, the local governments have clearly announced that either the projects would not be implemented or the whole process has been suspended (even though as late as after voting).

Based on the presented data we can observe that the monitored local governments in Slovakia approached the organization of participatory budgeting during the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways. Within all monitored municipalities there are two main groups. The first group is represented by the local governments that decided to suspend their participatory budgeting processes completely, with no implementation in 2020. The second group is represented by those local governments that have proceeded with its implementation at least until the phase of project approval. Within the second group, there are another three subgroups. The first subgroup comprises those local governments that due to their participatory budgeting model ultimately did not face any of the challenges posed by the period of restricted meetings, because they do not envisage any public meetings (forums). The second subgroup is represented by those local governments that anticipate public meetings, but their specified time schedule planned the implementation before the pandemic (especially at the beginning of the year). This means that in this respect there were no barriers to the implementation of a given phase of participatory budgeting. And subsequently, the third subgroup consists of the local governments that envisage the meetings and active involvement of their citizens but failed to manage them until the beginning of the first restrictions. Heterogeneous approaches towards participatory budgeting under the pandemic circumstances occurred in some other countries as well. For instance, Cho, Jérôme and Maurice (2020) even observed the rise of participatory budgets in local communities in response to the centralization that characterizes France, which calls for higher involvement of citizens, and ultimately decentralization. More precisely, some local governments continued with participatory budgeting, some others had to deal with a clear drop of submitted projects, in some of them the initiatives of participatory budgeting were postponed or cancelled, but some other introduced or even amplified the participatory budgeting initiatives (Cho, Jérôme and Maurice, 2020).

The innovative methods of moving the participatory process to the online environment used by some local governments (e.g., Trnava Region, Banská Bystrica, Hlohovec) can be assessed as effective. Especially online solutions offered by wellgiving.sk seemed to play decisive role in cases of several local governments. In addition, these methods can be used beyond the pandemic period and open up the space for wider public involvement. For instance, the local government in Hlohovec arranged the online voting in the local library for those citizens who did not have the Internet access or any suitable device at home. Generally, several local governments dealt with the situation by way of employing online instruments and several of them arranged required meetings in the period of eased restrictions. One of the strategies was a shift to a two-year cycle (e.g., regional government of Trnava). The mayor of the Košice-KVP city district listed this measure as one of the enablers of the successful implementation of participatory budgeting under uncertain or volatile circumstances. However, majority of the local governments preferred conservative approach and rather suspended participatory budgeting in 2020. This behaviour is comparable with many local governments in Poland, but it differs from behaviour of local governments in the Czech Republic. Many Polish local governments waited for instructions from central level and they did not want to replace solutions based on personal contact by innovative online solutions (Popławski, 2020). According to Sedmíhradská, Kukučková and Bakoš (forthcoming), approximately two thirds of participatory budgeting initiatives in the Czech Republic had been managed through some externally-provided online services allowing project presentations, voting or even management of all processes. These services positively influenced reactions of the relevant local governments; thanks to their outsourcing, a clear majority of the local governments preferred to continue in participatory budgeting in 2020, too.

For the research expansion it may be interesting to further observe whether modern information and communication technologies in the online environment helped to increase citizen engagement and, at the same

time, if the local governments continued in the intensive use of electronic communication in the post-pandemic period. Several local governments resolved to start using online communication, which was not the practice until then, and which, as it was already mentioned in the theoretical part, can paradoxically enhance the access of the broad public to the participatory process. At the same time, they create a theoretical space for the reduction of time related, material as well as financial costs. Another desired research direction could be linked to outsourcing of electronic services. Our data show that the services provided by wellgiving.sk could played a crucial role in the continuation of participatory budgeting in a few local governments under the pandemic circumstances.

Conclusion

With regard to the first research question, if we look at the participatory budgeting implementation within local governments during the pandemic year, it is possible to observe a high number of local governments that decided to suspend it despite their initial plan for its implementation; 46 regional or local authorities planed its implementation. Specifically, only 21 out of all analysed sub-national governments resolved to continue in the participatory budgeting implementation up until the approval phase. This group, however, also comprises local governments that decided to suspend or postpone the projects for the next year only after the approval phase.

In relation to the second research question, the existence and use of online tools can be deemed one of the key enablers of the participatory budgeting implementation. There is a big group represented by the above-mentioned local governments using the platform of wellgiving.sk. In its essence, the platform enables the implementation of almost entire process from the submission of a project to voting. No use of the platform by some of the local governments, however, does not imply that they fail to use the online environment. For example, they enabled the projects to be submitted by way of email to the defined email address or, in relation to online voting, they used other online instruments. As for the online instruments, it is also possible to observe a significant promotion of participatory budgeting mainly on Facebook. There were even instances of a live streamed meeting. Another enabler of participatory budgeting implementation was a decision on easing of anti-pandemic restrictions in the summer of 2020. However, this enabler is beyond the control of local governments and as such could not have been directly impacted by them. The only thing they could do was to act promptly and several of them did. The last identified enabler, a two-year cycle, is worth consideration as well. However, it represents a solution that might move the potential burden into the future. A specific element that could have potentially helped the selected local governments is a "limited" model of the participatory budgeting, i.e., the absence of public meetings, public discussion forums, even voting. In this case, the local governments did not come across any limits related to the period of social distancing.

The presented findings may serve as a set of potential inspirations for other local governments, which have resolved to suspend participatory budgeting implementation due to their concerns related to their ability to implement the participatory elements of participatory budgeting.

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