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Sublocal decentralisation—the case of Slovak big cities

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Abstract. By means of case studies of Slovak cities, the author focuses on decentralisation processes at the local level, paying special attention to the role of local self-government during the transformation period in Central and Eastern Europe. Four main directions of sublocal decentralisation are considered: political decentralisation, managerial decentralisation, decentralisation to the so-called 'third sector', and decentralisation to the private or mixed sector. Cities have constituted 'Councils in City Quarters' as a tool for the improvement of local democracy and as an aid to more flexible local self-government. The previously state-controlled municipal sector has also been changed to a group of municipal, public – private, and private companies involved in delivery of local services, resulting in enhanced efficiency. A wide range of local functions took over the third sector—from delivery of particular services to the reconciling of many local interests. Sublocal decentralisation processes, although not yet complete, appear very promising and confirm the ability to cope with the transitional situation at the local level. An important feature is that the initial top-down control of the local level transformation has been replaced with an active and more autonomous role of local self-governments following the consolidation period. Slovak transition at the local level also documents the role of local self-government as hard to replace in the facilitation of local civil society building and highlights a need for a local democracy which is more complex in nature.

Introduction

This paper is part of the literature on transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Decentralisation and development at the local level is an immanent part of the transition processes, and for this reason, it is a popular topic of academic interest. Zsamboki and Bell (1997) critically assessed decentralisation and deconcentration processes, and emphasised that autonomous, effective, local self-governments are critical to the long-term success of the democratic and market reforms currently underway in Central and Eastern Europe. They consider that initial institutional reform is necessary, but not sufficient, for the development of autonomous local self-government. Pickvance (1997) focused on the link between local government and democracy, arguing that it is misleading to identify local government automatically with democracy, and that one should not believe that decentralisation leads necessarily to an increase in democracy. Many of the problems related to transition towards democracy at the local level were reviewed by Smith (1998). I consider the relationship between national and local democracy, and the relationship between civil society and local government to be the most important among several issues discussed in his article. Baldersheim et al (1996) have provided a deep insight into the early stages of transformation processes at the local level. All of these authors have indicated, as I do in this paper, that there are particular difficulties with the transition process, related to, for example, paternalism, hesitant and sceptical attitudes of citizens to the new local government institutions, and the fact that the political and legal agenda of local democratisation is far from closed in East-Central Europe.

My main aim in this paper is to analyse decentralisation tendencies at the local level. In addition, I intend to reveal the changing position of local self-government in the transformation of East-Central European society as it applies to Slovak cities. The

approach of local self-government to decentralisation can influence the success of local transformation. I was inspired in the formulation of my research objectives by Wollmann's (1997) analytical distinction between the founding and consolidation periods when dealing with development after the collapse of communist regimes. I use the Slovak case to document particular features of transformation processes at the local level during the later, consolidation, period, when local adaptation processes should be easier to see. Supposing that local self-governments achieved a particular level of autonomy (although, in the main, this is not sufficient) during the initial period of transformation (1990 – 94), I concentrated more on two other values of local government, mentioned by, for example, Sharpe (1970): local democracy and efficiency. I consider these two features to be the most influential in the background to the decentralisation experiences of Slovak urban government, and crucial for the success of transformation at the local level. A key issue is whether decentralisation and the attitudes of local self-governments influence local democracy and efficiency. How does local-level decentralisation contribute to the success of transformation in CEE societies? Although, it seems, it was not so difficult to execute the initial stage of decentralisation with the introduction of representative local institutions, the formulation of a basic legal framework, and the transfer of particular powers, it was not so easy to build the more participatory and direct forms of democracy demanded by the citizens. It seems that it was relatively easy for reform leaders at the central level to put pressure on the functioning of state apparatus, and to privatise substantial parts of national economy. However, are similar moves toward efficiency being made at the municipal level? Accepting general opinion about the top-down-driven changes to democracy and the market economy during the first years after 1989, the question remains as to whether the role of the local level was more active than later in the transition period. Were local self-governments able to use the particular level of autonomy which they had received from the centre at the beginning of the transformation process in order to strengthen local democracy and increase efficiency? Did it require local self-government initiatives in building new local institutions? The contribution of civil society to the current democratisation around the globe is generally accepted. Can we observe a growing role of local civil society in local life? Is the relationship between self-governments and local civil society important? Are local self-governments and local civil society isolated, or are they cooperating in the spirit of Putnam's (1993) concept of social capital building—with trust, networks, and civil engagement oriented on local collective well-being? In addition, what are the limits of the decentralisation activities of current local self-governments in transitional society?

In Slovakia, as in other Central Eastern European countries, decentralisation and the renewal of localism were among the main symbols of the transformation processes. Despite massive political rhetoric, in which wide support for decentralisation was declared, the process has progressed slowly and has depended on central-level decisions, and the extent of the powers transferred to the local level has been limited. One of the main determinants was the adoption of a dual character public administration, with strictly divided lines between self-government and state administration. The development of Slovak public administration during the 1990s, with the principal change being manifest in a new administrative territorial division approved in 1996 (reorganisation at the district level and the introduction of new regions), cannot be conceived as sufficient decentralisation. It concerned only the state administration, without the transfer of new powers to the self-governmental institutions. The newly introduced regions are purely administrative units without any form of democratic representation (Surazska et al, 1996). There are regional and district state administration offices, but no regional or district self-governmental institutions. Jaura (1998) analysed expenditures and employment in

state administration and clearly documented their rapid growth (for example, expenditure on state administration increased from 3.6% in 1993 to 6.6% in 1996 of the total state expenditure). The argument that these 'new state building' costs are inevitable may be disputed (after the introduction of regional state administration, the number of employees at the central level grew constantly). The redistribution of competencies from the central state to the regional and district state administration were, in fact, an expression of central state power building, and left very limited possibilities for the expansion of local self-governments' powers. After the first wave of decentralisation and democratisation legislature, combined with the transfer of particular basic powers to local self-government (especially in 1990), the process did not continue appreciably. The transfer of competencies from state administration to the self-government (at the local and planned regional levels) has become the issue of long-term disputes between central government and the representatives of local self-governments (Association of Towns and Communes of Slovakia, Union of Cities). Flourishing state district, regional, and central bureaucracy will not be very enthusiastic supporters of any potential future transfer of power to the local or regional self-government. Although, in general, decentralisation was limited after the first democratising decisions in the early 1990s, there emerged hopeful signs of decentralisation processes within self-governments, especially during the 1994–98 electoral period, which I describe in this paper as 'sublocal decentralisation'.

Despite their limited range of powers, recent years (1990–98) have confirmed the respected position and vitality of local self-governments within the system of public administration of the Slovak republic. Nevertheless, the prompt introduction of basic legal and institutional framework of self-government has not produced the final solution on issues such as democracy, or administrative and service efficiency. Konečný (1997) dealt with decentralisation and with central–local relations in Slovakia. He emphasised decentralisation as a transfer of powers from state administration to the local self-governments, but perceived this decentralisation as not completed and as an issue for future development. The creation of main local self-governmental institutions (election of mayors, local councils, formation of executive offices) could be considered to be accomplished, but there were still some discrepancies in the management and functioning of local society. The representative democracy strongly dominated participatory and direct democracy—some signs of dissatisfaction and decrease in trust in local self-government were observed among citizens after the first years of transformation (Sopóci, 1995). Direct contact with councillors ceased after elections, and their activity was not visible (Falt'an, 1993). Problems emerged related to the lasting citizens' passivity (with exception of the first 'revolution' months), limited citizens' sovereignty, and reliance on state paternalism. Civil society was destroyed under the previous regime and needed to be reestablished.

The urban government not only reflected problems typical of local self-government in Slovakia, but also particular specific ones. Falt'an (1993) wrote that the lack of trust, reserved attitudes toward local self-government, and reduced responsiveness were more pronounced in the urban environment. Overconcentrated decisionmaking, the absence of wider participation, and 'nonproportional' attitudes of self-government vis à vis the urban area (for example, not respecting the interests and needs of particular spatial segments of the city) were among the main problems. The existence of only one City Hall (located, in the main, in the city centre) led to the concentration of a substantial portion of the city government activities. Local councillors and executive bodies frequently worked without effective local citizens' participation, especially in the inter-electoral period. There were urban areas without their 'own' councillor—the absence of really local representation was perceived as nondemocratic in some of the more cohesive local communities. They viewed local self-government as nonresponsive

government 'from outside'. Citizens in Slovak cities do not know exactly who 'their' councillor is—who has direct affiliation to any particular segment of the city's territory. The single list of candidates, and the large multimember constituencies, in the Slovak local electoral system do not foster direct ties between the citizens and the councillors (as happens, for example, in the case of single-member constituencies). Councillors did not work as an active and reliable channel between citizens living in various city quarters and local self-government decisionmaking. This deficit in democracy could damage the position of local self-government among the citizens, and could, thus, damage the local transition agenda, especially that managed by the local self-government. In this situation, even reasonably established local representative democracy faced some difficulties in big cities. The appropriate conditions, practice, and culture of participation did not develop immediately after the introduction of self-governmental institutions. This generated misunderstandings and conflicts in local policy among groups of citizens and local self-governments, including extreme manifestation of self-interest (for example, petitioning, protest actions). It led to rising dissatisfaction, resignation, noncooperative attitudes, and apathy (expressed in low electoral turnout). Long-term failures may damage the high status which democracy and local self-government achieved after the collapse of communism. Bad habits of state paternalism, fragmentation of interests, noncooperative behaviour, potential fragmentation in self-governments which are too small and inefficient, and paralysed development, can emerge as results of the inability to cope with the transitional situation at the local level. We cannot consider these consequences as desirable results of transformation at the local level. It is probably local self-government which should take over the role of local democracy and efficient local self-government, building from the central level.

Some difficulties of the fragmentation of Slovak big cities self-government, selected features of political decentralisation, and possible directions of future development have been outlined in earlier papers (Buček, 1997; 1998). In this paper, basic tendencies and general problems concerning decentralisation processes at the local level are discussed, in the first section. I try to cover all of the main directions of decentralisation: political and managerial, as well as decentralisation to the so-called 'third sector', and decentralisation toward the public – private and private sectors. The majority of cities have understood the unsuitability of the centralisation of self-government functions exclusively within citywide or municipal structures. A quasi two-tier form of local government structure has developed during the two periods of local self-government in large Slovak cities. This form of local self-government is suitable for large cities, where the fully developed two-tier model would lead toward harmful fragmentation, and unitary local self-government being too centralised. It is more suitable for 'own' local self-government traditions in particular quarters of the cities, and for building more complex local democracy. Although political decentralisation dominates this paper, I also outline the main features of decentralisation to the local private and voluntary 'third' sector. Although an intensive search for more effective public-services delivery, combined with extensive transfers of function to the private and public – private sectors had begun immediately after introduction of local self-government, the role of the third sector has grown markedly since 1994. The process of sublocal institutional environment development and perfection of the system of local level efficient democratic functioning is not yet finished. The cities search for optimal forms and high standards of their activities. Their rights, functions, organisation, and final goals are different within, as well as between, the cities, respecting specific local needs and previous development. Some approaches of particular cities are very innovative, document positive learning processes, and offer the application of some successful approaches in the self-government of the other big cities.

Sublocal decentralisation processes were studied in a sample of nine big cities (from the point of view of the Slovak urban system), whose self-governmental system is not organised according to the two-tier model (as is in the case of Bratislava and Košice—the two biggest cities in Slovakia). The selected group of Slovak cities includes Banská Bystrica, Michalovce, Lučenec, Nitra, Poprad, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava, and Žilina. These are mostly centres of new administrative regions, with between 30 000 (Lučenec, Michalovce) and almost 100 000 inhabitants (Banská Bystrica, Prešov, Žilina). Self-government offices in these cities have higher financial and professional capacities. They have fully developed administrative structures and manage more functions. They are the most informative for the study of decentralisation tendencies as local responses to the problems of the transitional period. I am concerned above all with the formation of Councils in City Quarters (*Slov. Výbory v Mestských Častiach*—VMCs), which cities can implement into their self-government structure in accordance with the law (Act No 369/1990). Thanks to the more complex nature of urban life, the decentralisation of previously local self-government functions to the voluntary organisations, associations, or public–private and private institutions is also best studied in these cities. My main sources of information were the official documents of the local self-governments—City Charters, local bylaws, and budgets. Various other sources of information documenting functioning of decentralised institutions were used, including archived meeting records, interviews with local officials, and local and national press reports. The information used was gathered in the period 1997–98, close to the end of the second electoral period of local self-governments in Slovakia (1994–98). Details of these sources are given in the appendix.

Sublocal decentralisation in big cities

The decentralisation processes at the local level are similar in the public administration of many states. They are applied especially in large local government units: bit cities, and large administrative units of states that went through the processes of amalgamation (the creation of larger units of local government from previously fragmented small units). The most often mentioned is decentralisation to sublocal institutions, connected with particular spatial segments of local government units. With respect to the two most often mentioned models of governance in big cities (see, for example, Sharpe, 1995) we must differentiate between decentralisation within unitary urban government, which is the main subject of the present paper, and fully developed two-tier urban government (although there can also be sublocal decentralisation).

As was documented by Liebmann (1995), sublocal structures of government were historically very similar in many countries. These structures also exist in former-communist cities, mostly for the mobilisation and control of local participation (for example, 'voluntary' work). Their role was very minor, being only the most local part of the centralised, Party-controlled, governmental system. Various well-developed current sublocal structures work well, for example in cities in Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Spain, the USA, and Switzerland (Burns et al, 1994; Duncan, 1990; Hambleton, 1988; Maes, 1997). Here they take the form of urban parishes, community councils, neighbourhoods, residential community associations, etc. The roots of the latest wave of decentralisation are usually related to the new trends in management theory which emerged in the 1980s (Lowndes, 1992). Decentralisation at the local level has become part of a general transformation and modernisation of management, in which flexibility, better innovation dynamics, and more respect for the 'customers' are emphasised. This influence has also been important in the public sector and its relationship with the citizen. Decentralisation is one of the conditions crucial for the development of better opportunities for local structures of participatory and associative democracy to function (Etzioni, 1995;

Hirst, 1997) as a very important supplement of the basic local government structure of representative local democracy.

It is important to clarify what is meant by 'decentralisation'. Bennett (1997) mentioned two basic types of decentralisation: intergovernmental decentralisation and decentralisation from the governments to the market, quasi-market, and nongovernmental organisations. Although we can also consider nonterritorial intergovernmental decentralisation (for example, within one organisation), usually decentralisation has a spatial dimension. The transfer of competencies from the centre, mostly to a larger number of lower-tier territorial institutions or units defines the area-based form. Decentralisation within government can be divided into two subtypes: managerial and political (based on Hambleton, 1988; Lowndes, 1992). Managerial decentralisation concerns the transfer of executive powers down the organisation structure, among the levels of managers, levels of executive offices, or bureaucracy in area or field offices (for example, from state ministry to regional or district offices). For this form of decentralisation the term 'deconcentration' is more often used. Political decentralisation—decentralisation per se—concerns the transfer of competencies from higher to lower levels of representative (elected) bodies of the political territorial organisation of the state (and their directly subordinate executive bodies). These two last directions of decentralisation are typified by the transfer of particular functions outside public sector. This means the takeover of many old and new roles within a locality by private and mixed corporations. The fourth direction is decentralisation to the voluntary nonprofitmaking organisations—the so-called 'third sector', which has begun to be very influential in the functioning of local civil society. A conceptual framework of sublocal decentralisation in these four main directions is presented on figure 1. Decentralised bodies in all directions have various levels of autonomy, territorial dimensions, and closeness to the core role played by local self-governments.

The motives and aims of sublocal decentralisation may differ. A combination of improvement in the delivery of public services and democratisation is frequently

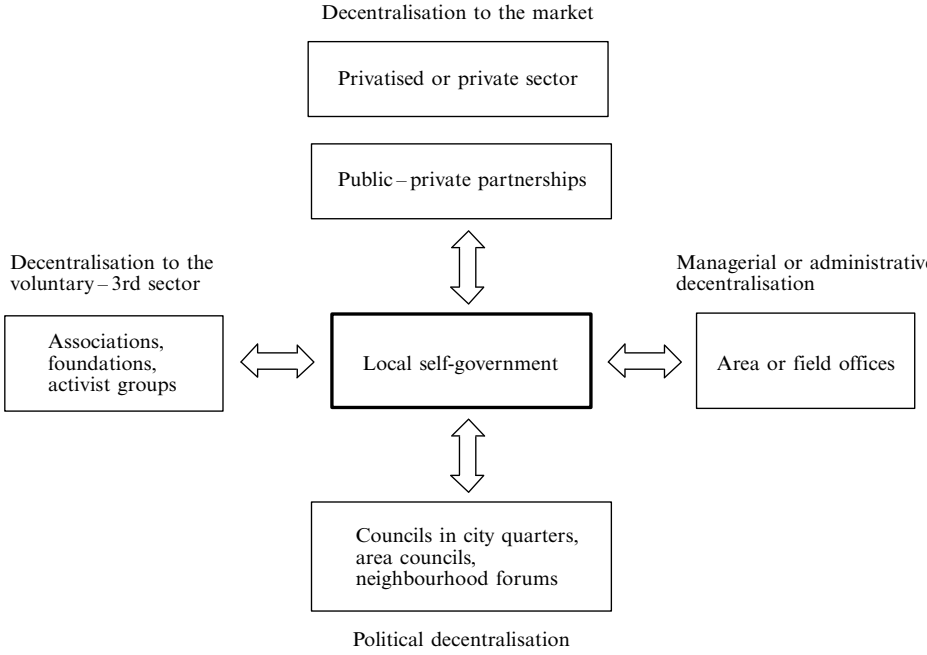

Figure 1. Four directions of sublocal decentralisation.

emphasised (Hambleton et al, 1994). Although in many countries with mature democracy, managerial aspects of decentralisation are emphasised (better and more effective service delivery), in transitional societies as in Slovakia the political dimension is also very important. Local level self-government is not only the second most important political level in the country, but it has also been one of the symbols of, and important actors in, social transformation since 1989. Local democracy and its improvements are among the most important values related to the success of the transitional period. If this were discredited it could lead to the disillusion of citizens with one of the pillars of the new postcommunist society.

The 'better service' argument is mentioned in the majority cases of 'managerial' decentralisation, and these arguments also prevail in the case of decentralisation to the open market (delivery of services by the private and mixed sectors). In some cases, the issue is one of improvement of access to particular services for particular citizens, for example, those living in more remote parts, or particular social groups with higher proportions of older citizens or other frequent users. Better accessibility, smaller scale, narrow-focused local orientation, chance for personal approach, more informal relations, and availability of very local information can influence the efficiency of local administration and service delivery, especially in the area of reactions to local requirements and problems. Among the democratisation arguments, strengthening of active participation, growing mutual responsibility, creation of information flows that allow local politics more influence on central agencies can all be mentioned. The existence of legitimate sublocal institutions and the possibility of sublocal decisionmaking are very important. These enhance the chances of more effective decisionmaking by citywide local government when exploiting the continuous information flow from decentralised institutions, which convey information about local interests and preferences.

The low level of electoral participation, and underdeveloped ties between the citizens and councillors are serious problems for the democratic functioning of local self-government (that is, the legitimacy of local government), especially n big cities. Under such conditions, one cannot rely only on the processes of representative democracy. It seems that we cannot depend, in the long term, on only one particular model of local democracy. Local democracy and local institutions have to react to the growing complexity of processes within the cities. The basis of current local democratic society is in the intersection among representative, direct, participatory, and associative democracy. This means growing institutional richness, which also involves the creation of sublocal representative institutions which are open to citizens' participation in the processes of decisionmaking. Citizens can also influence their local environment via voluntary associations. Decentralised public – private and private bodies can serve their local needs better.

Sublocal political decentralisation tendencies can be expressed in many ways. They are strongly dependent on national legislature and local conditions. The simplest form of expression under the prevailing system of sectoral commissions of city councils is the formation of special permanent commissions to be explicitly oriented toward specific problems of city quarters, for example, spatial aspects of service delivery, proportionality of development, participation of citizens in particular localities. Another possibility is the formation of subcouncils composed according to the city quarters they represent (as 'territorial' councils). This can be the second line of division of councillors on the territorial principle, and can complete the common division on sectoral principles (as a normal part of committee or departmental work). Their function for the territory can be one of monitoring and mobilising participation, and they can also have some initiative rights within the city council. They can work more in 'city halls', or in concrete localities. These two forms of decentralisation 'inside the city council' cannot be considered as fully genuine spatial sublocal political decentralisation.

More real spatial decentralisation, with the existence of sublocal institutions in city quarters, strongly depends on the scope of the competencies transferred. Hambleton (1988) concludes that the simplest case is provided by centres offering information, or advisory services, or consultation, for a particular part of the city (concerning activities of self-government). Higher forms are units, which some services coordinate or deliver directly to the citizens. The highest form of spatial decentralisation occurs when such decentralised bodies also have important decisionmaking rights. Whereas the lower forms of decentralisation are more of a managerial character, the higher forms may be considered as political decentralisation. These considerations are related also to the functional scope of decentralised units. One quite narrow form is the establishment of monofunctional sublocal institutions (for example, the deconcentrated office of some city office department). More extensive is decentralisation by the creation of sublocal institutions dealing with the delivery or coordination of more public services. This means the existence of larger, rather polyfunctional, or even general, sublocal bodies (especially in big cities). Within one sublocal office these can accumulate the decentralised work of several municipal departments. Institutions of political decentralisation are usually not very strictly functionally limited; they deal with all activities in a particular part of the city.

There is a wide variety of organisational forms of decentralised sublocal institutions. Managerial decentralisation: deconcentration, where there are established sublocal executive (bureaucratical) institutions and service centres responsible for the delivery or administration of particular services. They can be field offices of local government office departments, field centres of social care, etc. We can think about political decentralisation on the local level when there are institutions of sublocal political decisionmaking on the level of various local communities, city quarters, etc. Decentralisation to the private sector is based on delivery of particular services by private or quasi-private firms. Various forms of licensing, partnerships, contracting, and indirect control are possible. The voluntary 'third' sector, nongovernment organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations have also taken over important roles in local life, local services, and the management of local affairs.

Legitimacy is one of the key areas of importance concerning sublocal political institutions. Decentralised institutions can hold powers based on state legislation, or they may be constituted and have powers transferred according to the decision of the citywide local council. The legitimacy of the members of sublocal institutions can have general bases. Three sources of legitimacy—based on elections, based on knowledge, and based on ability to mobilise passive citizens (Smith and Blanc, 1997)—can be successfully combined. These sublocal bodies may consist of elected members of the citywide council (in the case of big local councils). Of course, the formation of sublocal institutions may be by direct election. Territorial sublocal institutions in which elected members participate have much higher legitimacy, as well as direct accountability to the citizens. Elected members can be combined with various nominated members delegated on principles of professional expertise or of representation of the sublocal community (representatives of various associations, citizen initiatives, neighbourhoods, etc). The composition of the institutions can be then very variable. On the one hand, they may be purely administrative and professional institutions dominated by officials—bureaucracy, specialised technocracy, managers, and executive staff. On the other hand, these institutions can be strictly political (comprised only of elected members). Combined forms are also acceptable, with both elected and nominated members. Local activists and leaders of local organisations can form advisory and consultative bodies, which represent more informal sublocal institutions such as neighbourhood councils, and neighbourhood forums. They can also act on behalf of the locality in dealing with

citywide institutions, or can form sublocal participatory structures to parallel the decentralised formal sublocal councils. Legitimacy of decentralisation as it is concerned with the public – private and private sectors, and, to a certain extent the third sector, is based on the decisions of the city council. In well-defined market conditions new private subjects can emerge in what was previously the public domain. A suitable legal environment supports a high birth rate of new third-sector activities and organisations with growing roles in local public life.

Sublocal decentralisation cannot avoid the problem of spatial division in sublocal units. This concerns the issues of sublocal identity, coherence of communities, and the existence of various functional regions and catchment areas (schooling, social services, etc). It is better not to emphasise the role of borders and not to deal with the exact and firm delimitation of each relevant sublocal unit. On the other hand, it is not advisable to allow too much freedom in organising the spatial dimension of sublocal decentralisation, as it can lead to never-ending fragmentation, many monofunctional spaces, and to frequent changes of territories of interest. It is connected to the overlapping and conflict of various interests in one territory, and to possible efforts to serve narrow group interests in some localities. The main risk factor is the interchangeability of interests within time. Division of territory into smaller territorial units according to the electoral districts as part of the most suitable solution for political decentralisation. It allows very simple recruitment of elected representatives to these institutions. An important issue is the size of these units, either in terms of area or of population numbers. If these units are very large and populous, and the decentralised powers are very limited, then the effects on increased participation are uncertain. The issue of size is very important in the case of decentralisation of various functions and their optimal delivery.

The financing of decentralised units is closely related to their sectoral status, functional orientation, and statutory position. The issue of resources can be a reason for limiting the introduction of decentralisation. Decentralisation is possible in transition countries because it is not inevitably expensive. Among the arguments for decentralisation, those of low costs and the saving of public resources are important and attractive. Sublocal political institutions can work without special budgets (running costs are covered at the local level), but they can also have their own budgets (with incomes and expenditures), or can receive financial resources for their expenditures on the basis of decisions included within the citywide budget. There is also the opportunity to distribute finances to these decentralised units according to special distribution formulas, which are related to functions delivered, structural characteristics of the population, and administered facilities. They can have the right to collect resources from various sources (grants, sponsors, gifts, etc). Sublocal managerial institutions responsible for the delivery of particular services can be financed directly from the municipal budget, or can be financed in their performance of these services (service fees, or partial transfers from local government). Public – private and private institutions are business oriented, usually selling their services and products. The voluntary sector is multisource financed, and is not solely dependent on local resources.

An important aspect of the success of these sublocal decentralised units relates to the fact that they must have sufficient powers and must achieve visible effects, otherwise the willingness of citizens to participate in or to accept these institutions may decrease very quickly. The idea of sublocal decentralisation can be devalued in the eyes of local citizens and its positive potential hence lost. The danger with sublocal decentralisation is that it can emerge as a threat to local cohesion, with the eventual advent of too much fragmentation, or disintegration. Paradoxically, this danger of disintegration is sometimes much bigger when decentralised institutions do not exist. It is often

difficult to satisfy the requirements of various city quarters at the level of the citywide government. It is quite difficult to estimate levels of needs and problems, and the weight of particular interests. Active groups are able to overcome the interests of less well organised groups of citizens or city quarters. The clash of citywide and city-quarter interests can partly paralyse, or influence the efficiency of, local decisionmaking. Even such issues as efficiency and territorial justice within the whole city territory are more easily satisfied under conditions of decentralisation. Decisions about preferences and the ranking of problems are more transparent, and local democracy is more representative and responsive. Political culture and the solidarity level within the city also influence the final effects of sublocal decentralisation and the decisionmaking of local government concerning very local issues.

Decentralisation in the self-government of big cities in Slovakia

Political decentralisation

Owing to the various aspects of their development, Slovak big cities are not spatially compact and homogenous urban structures. Within the cities we find attractive city centres, often with valuable historical parts, as well as quarters with predominantly housing, industrial, or leisure functions. Among city quarters which largely comprise housing, there is older housing in the city centre, as well as large socialist housing estates and residential quarters with family houses, and really rural settlements in integrated villages. They have different origins and different problems. One of the biggest problems for local self-governments is that of how to recognise and satisfy the particular interests of such different local environments. How can proportional care and comparable balanced functioning of the whole urban environment be arranged under their jurisdiction? How can this be achieved during the transition period, under the conditions of local democracy building, institutional reconstruction, and financial difficulty?

One of the primary problems of representative local democracy—proportional representation of all spatial communities in the city council—emerged in these cities. Particular segments of the urban population only rarely have their own councillors who can present and protect their needs at the citywide level. Their electoral potential, of about a few hundred votes, is insufficient to achieve even one councillor's position. In many cases, one electoral district consists of a number of diverse spatial communities, where votes are diluted. The situation of the problems and interests of particular sublocal communities being underestimated in local decisionmaking processes is not surprising. The difficult situation of local government during the transformation period and the prevailing tendency to deal especially with the modernisation of city centres shifted attention on their vital needs away to the margin of local priorities. Individual councillors are also less successful in attracting the attention of other councillors to solve very local problems. Long periods with no responses to the needs of these city quarters have caused critical disputes. These concerned the trust in the processes and institutions of local democracy, functioning, and justice in local self-government decisionmaking. A solution was sought in disintegration—the establishment of autonomous local self-governments, elected by local referendums. The consequences of a first wave of disintegration damaged the integrity of territorial management and led to complications in service delivery, fragmentation of resources, difficulties in urban planning and urban growth, and disputes over the location of some citywide facilities such as waste disposal and water-cleaning stations (Buček, 1997).

Slovak legislature offers the possibility of increasing sensitivity to the problems of particular city quarters: 'Councils in City-Quarters' (*Slov. Výbory v Mestských Častiach*—VMCs), as they are explicitly named in Act No 369 approved in 1990. In this Act it is

clearly stated that the city should establish territory councils within the city quarters, and that members of these councils should all be councillors elected in those city quarters. This act is also explicit in defining the basic rights of these councils: to represent the citizens of city quarters and to participate in the self-government of the city. According to the act, three important decisions concerning the city quarter can only be accomplished with the agreement of the VMC: change of cadastral territory, approval of planning documentation, and change of the city-quarter name.

The role of VMCs as expressed in the law was very narrow and their potential was not suitably exploited by local self-governments. This resulted in uncreative application during the first years of local self-government, which has not satisfied the sublocal communities, especially those in integrated villages. We can use Clark's (1984) approach to local autonomy, with two basic principles of local power—power of immunity and power of initiative—to better understand such a limited outline. The scope of the power of the VMC, as expressed in Slovak legislature, is limited to three mentioned areas. No other competencies are explicitly mentioned. The rights defined directly by the national legislature are rights of immunity. The rights of initiative are not defined. This is the 'spirit' of the law which, in general, provides great opportunities for the organisation of local self-government according to the needs of particular cities. City councils can decentralise other rights to the VMCs, for example, through transfer declared in city charters, according to local needs and circumstances.

Some big Slovak cities had used VMCs for selected activities immediately after 1990, but mostly as a tool for the organisation of meetings with citizens. Councils in city quarters have only gradually achieved a more respected position within the structure and decisionmaking processes in cities; the process has been slow compared with the weight of more precisely defined and more important institutions of local self-government—especially the mayors and city councils. From the legal point of view, the position and influence of VMCs depend on city council decisions, including those on the scope and importance of the transferred rights. This development in the understanding of VMCs is reflected in the two directions which their formation had taken. The first period was characterised by a more schematic introduction of these decentralised councils from above. Cities formed VMCs formally, and mostly only as a reaction to an existing legal opportunity. No substantial development of sublocal intergovernmental political and managerial decentralisation happened during the first period of democratic self-government (1990–94).

Development during the second period, after 1994, has been more dynamic. Various groups and spatial communities have mobilised themselves, especially when their local interests have been under threat. Impulses for such citizens' mobilisation—'the awakening of local communities'—were often 'locational' conflicts (decisions on the location of particular facilities and investments, which were mostly of citywide interest, in their neighbourhood). In the Slovak case, this traditional problem of local governments usually comes about in conflicts over the location of environmental facilities (new waste disposals) and the location of social housing (including housing for so-called 'socially nonconfirming' citizens, often including Gypsies). The second main group of factors leading to local mobilisation and local dissatisfaction concerns long-term underestimation of sublocal interests in the field of local infrastructure and development (water treatment, sewage, gas, other local facilities, etc). These pressures from below, which were the main feature of this period of VMC development, were recognised by city councils which attempted to create functioning democratic sublocal institutions which could identify potential conflicts, create space for participation and communication with citizens, and organise more balanced development at the citywide scale.

Seven of the sample cities took up the opportunity to have VMCs (Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Poprad, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava, and Žilina). Two of the smallest cities have not adopted VMCs (Lučenec, Michalovce), although this opportunity is mentioned in their city charters. City charters have been changed substantially in the sections defining the role of VMCs in some cities (for example, in Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Trenčín, Žilina) within the last few years (1995 – 97). Their position has been enhanced far above the minimal position defined by the state legislature. VMCs have become a more important and better incorporated part of the self-governmental institutional environment in big Slovak cities. Because only one city (Poprad) introduced local decentralised administrative and service centres, which can be considered typical forms of managerial decentralisation, political decentralisation (the VMC) clearly prevails between two intergovernmental forms of decentralisation.

The legitimacy framework of VMCs is based on the legitimacy of the city council and the city councillors. In each city in the sample, in accordance with the national legislature, councillors are elected in particular city quarters to be members of the relevant VMCs. VMCs consist exclusively of city councillors in only two cities (Trenčín, Poprad). The rest of the cities prefer mixed VMCs: some of their members are city councillors, but others are not. Members who are not councillors are usually elected, or at least approved, by the city council (Prešov, Nitra). Some cities also have supportive parallel citizens' institutions, such as citizen's councils (Banská Byrstrica), or advisory and initiative councils (Žilina). These participate in but are not directly involved with decisionmaking within VMCs (that is, they have no voting rights in VMCs).

The size of VMCs varies from between 6 and 7 members (especially in smaller integrated villages) to between 16 – 18 members (especially in the case of VMCs in the central parts of the cities). The organisational structure is very similar in all cities. The chairperson should usually be a city councillor (in Trenčín this is narrowed to members of the City Board, which is part of the City Council). There are a vice-chairperson and a secretary in many VMCs (responsible for VMC documentation, meeting records, etc). The division of work among these managers of VMCs is usually decided by the VMC itself. City charters, or specific guidelines approved by city councils contain important recommendations and requirements concerning their work. Selected officials working in city offices are nominated to the VMCs in some cities. They are responsible for the administrative functioning of the VMC and for more efficient communication between the VMC, city office, and city council.

Councils in city-quarters activities are oriented more toward specific issues relating to city quarters, although in some cities VMCs also work to short-term plans (usually for one year). Their work is partly a localised form of the citywide electoral-period programme and partly issues of local importance. In general, the VMCs receive for evaluation and noting all proposals of the city council which concern or indirectly influence their city quarter. They have quite wide rights of initiative relating to all city-level institutions and municipal enterprises. VMCs address all the proposals, complaints, recommendations, and requirements of organisational departments of city offices. Here their agenda is redistributed according to the problem addressed by particular departments of the city office; municipal enterprises, which are obliged to answer within a defined time period (or to resolve the problem). In some cities (Trenčín, Prešov), all of the VMCs' conclusions have the status of city councils interpellation, and have to be responded to or resolved within one month of delivery to the recipient's office. Any problem which cannot be resolved within the city office departments is put on the programmes of the city board and the city council meetings. The registration of all documentation, all communication, both answers and relevant decisions, as well as meeting records, are archived by the city offices.

The questions of borders and the spatial division of the city for decentralisation purposes are decided in the main by the use of historical cadastral borders (especially in the case of integrated villages). The second approach to be applied is based on electoral districts (within compact urban environments without cadastral borders). This approach allows very clear connection of elected representatives with territories and the citizens they represent. These two main approaches—cadastral territory and electoral districts—are often combined in the configuration of VMCs. The borders issue is related to the issue of the size of the decentralised units. Whereas in some cities smaller city quarters are preferred, in other cities larger units are preferred, in which more quarters or cadastral territories are put together under one VMC. For example, Trenčín has 4 VMCs, Poprad 6, and Žilina 8 VMCs, whereas Prešov has 11 and Nitra 13 VMCs. The size of city quarter having a VMC varies between 6700 citizens in Nitra and 14 700 citizens in Trenčín, but in many cases it depends on size of the city quarter which may, in the case of integrated villages, be only a few hundreds of citizens.

The financial aspects of the work of VMCs are considerable and consist of three main issues: financing VMCs' running costs, financing VMCs' activities, and influencing decisionmaking concerning finances within the city as a whole. The costs of VMCs' functions are not very high and these costs (administrative costs, renting rooms, advertising, etc) are directly covered within city office budgets; VMCs' activities are almost totally dependent on the city budget. VMCs in some cities (for example, Banská Byrstrica, Žilina) have their own budgets and receive smaller, more or less symbolic sums from city budgets (of the order only of some tens of thousand of Slovak crowns, called the 'emergency' or 'city quarter' fund). These resources serve to solve some of the smaller problems on their territories. They are used for small aesthetic works, small reconstructions, the organisation of selected local activities (local market days, local anniversaries), or are redistributed as small grants to small local projects (including schools and third-sector initiatives). VMCs can acquire resources to cover their own expenditures, such as sponsors, voluntary collections, and income from their own activities.

VMCs regularly discuss and comment on the city budgets from the point of view of city quarters. The formulation of expenditure priorities concerning particular city quarters is one of the main financial roles of VMCs. An important change to emerge within the last few years is the solving of problems of peripheral city quarters which are now better financed (higher investments in noncentral city quarters, for example, in Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Poprad), thanks to the activity of VMCs. The evaluation of incomes and expenditures by city quarters is becoming an established part of the analysis of annual city-budget proposals and their annual final accounts. Such transparency of financial flows is very helpful in engendering long-term trust and in building understanding between councillors and citizens.

VMCs' meetings are part of an important form of sublocal decisionmaking and participatory arenas. Their frequency is usually defined in the cities' main documents, at 6 – 10 meetings per year. Such frequencies of meetings have fostered the development of the best councils in some cities. On the other hand, there are VMCs which have meetings only 1 – 3 times a year—more or less formal, obligatory meetings, with no significant participation of citizens. At present, meetings are held in the city quarters, in some cases very regularly (for example, on the first Thursday of each month). Local citizens are informed about the meetings in various ways: in local newspapers, in various local programme and cultural weeklies, in local magazines published monthly, through information tables, or on local radio. The chairpersons, in cooperation with city offices, are responsible for the organisation of VMC meetings. Meetings are open to the public, and citizens, especially those directly concerned with a particular section of the programme (for example, the approval of new entrepreneurial activities within

the city quarters and new investments). Citizens also use this opportunity to present their own proposals or complaints. VMCs also organise large public meetings at which the level of citizens' participation is much higher. Here the most important issues of local life are discussed. The highest participation is when some new local or city initiative is starting, or one of the key persons of city life is invited (for example, the mayor). The role of VMCs in local life is not limited to the organisation of formal meetings and the official work of the council. The VMC is an important initiator and organiser in various fields of local social life. This role is very important, especially in integrated villages. Meetings in city quarters also have important symbolic value in maintaining municipal buildings in city quarters for public use.

There are several ways in which citywide institutions may be influenced from sublocal level. Via proposals, initiatives, and questions addressed to the citywide level, councillors have the chance to represent the needs of city quarters at the city council meetings. A councillor's initiative is more influential when backed by local participation. VMCs often use their right to invite leading representatives of the city to their meetings, especially mayors, vice mayors, city managers, chairs of city office departments, as well as the chief executive officers of city enterprises and the city police. Invitations to VMC meetings are also sent to local state administration officials, local entrepreneurs, and top managers of local corporations. The mayors of some cities have a duty to organise regular meetings with chairs or other representatives of these sublocal councils. VMCs have begun to influence the management of city quarter territory on a more serious scale. One of the consequences of this is that leading representatives of the cities have started to take the problems of city quarters more seriously, especially in the case of peripheral city quarters.

The main roles and fields of VMCs activity are defined in the cities' main documents (city charters, various guidelines). The building of ties between the city and city quarters is among the foremost objectives, and is based on information exchange about the work of the city council and the city office (explanation of decisions, strategies, etc). In reverse, it is a channel through which city quarters can indicate particular problems, present proposals for improvement, and represent interests of city-quarter citizens at the citywide level. VMCs are dealing extensively with very local citizens' requirements, as is well documented in their meeting records. They are focused on environmental issues and the physical environment (including voluntary works, and reviewing planning and regulation documents). Regularly on the agenda are issues of transport: the state of local roads, investments, transport security, and especially the organisaiton and timetables of city mass transport. VMC meetings are also suitable forums for expressing opinions on local economic development and entrepreneurial activities within the city quarter. VMCs examine the delivery of public services (including 'on-site' control both of municipal companies and of private contractors). Councils in city quarters are active also in examining municipal-property exploitation. Frequent areas of interest relate to schooling, local culture (protection of the local heritage), health, and social services. VMCs are mediators in organising cooperation between state policy and city police in localities with security problems. Members of the VMCs are initiators of local social life in cooperation with other local bodies, mainly with various associations and their activists. Cooperation with various associations at the level of city quarters is more flexible than it would be if they tried to cooperate with the institutions at the city level.

VMCs have great potential for improving local democracy, engendering more efficient self-government and higher quality local life (environmental issues and security are the issues discussed most frequently). Space does not permit the description of the structure, procedures, and fields of activity of each VMC. The most advanced levels and high standards of work were achieved by VMCs in cities such as Poprad, Prešov, Nitra,

Banská Bystrica. Numerous successful VMCs have performed a wide spectrum of activities and achieved a high level of participation, whereas some others are narrowly oriented only toward particular fields of city-quarter life and participation is weaker. VMCs have confirmed their great potential in the modernisation of local life. They are systematically improving their function and strengthening their position within the institutions of local government.

Current Slovak legislature offers two main directions of the future development of sublocal political decentralisation (Buček, 1998). The first possibility is the further strengthening of VMCs' competencies; the second is a shift toward a full two-tier model of self-government in big cities. The present situation can be described as the formation of quasi-two-tier model of self-government in some big Slovak cities. There is a 'bounded' lower level consisting of VMCs, and a higher level composed of the city self-government (mayor and city council). The transition to a fully developed two-tier model requires legislation. Nevertheless, in the case of larger cities with almost 100 000 inhabitants, which are centres of administrative regions (Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Prešov, Žilina), it is possible that eventually this limitation may be reconsidered.

Sublocal decentralisation to the public – private and private sector

Decentralisation to the public – private and private sectors at the local level is closely related to the strategy of transformation of society, and especially to the processes of privatisation. Decentralisation is still limited to health services, elementary and secondary schooling, water and sewage systems, etc. The majority of decentralised local functions were introduced very quickly during the initial stage of the changes occurring immediately after 1989. Among the typical local competencies are waste collection and waste disposal, local development, urban planning, housing, road maintenance and cleaning, mass transport, city lighting, local police, and local culture. Various state regulations influence local services, and some functions are shared with the state (for example, police, mass transport), but the typical 'communist' municipal services disappeared after changes in ownership, organisation, management techniques, staff, and technology.

Decentralisation toward the private local level has proceeded in two main ways since 1989. The main parts of local services and retailing were privatised under the process of 'small privatisation'. This development was often combined with the fragmentation of numerous former state-controlled companies. The second group of services, local facilities, and property were 'municipalised', that is, they were transferred to the ownership of municipalities, although this was in many cases only an interim arrangement, with subsequent transformation to mixed public – private companies or full privatisation (generating resources for the municipality). The main reasons for the major changes in service delivery, including changes in ownership, were: poor efficiency of municipal enterprises, citizens' perception of unsatisfactory delivery, the need for innovation, higher professionalism, and higher quality, and financial pressure with the search for possible additional resources from private financing.

In many cases various forms of former public services delivery coexist even within one city: fully municipal, mixed (public – private) and private. Private delivery is usually combined with a competitive-tendering procedure and the renting or sale of the existing municipal facilities related to particular services. Fully private delivery is widespread in waste collection and disposal, transport management and administration, funeral services and the administration of cemeteries, street cleaning and maintenance, the management of particular city facilities (sports centres, market places, exhibition centres), and the management of city property (including housing). For example, 'Technical Services', the municipal enterprise responsible for the delivery of public services in the

city of Trnava was replaced in 1992 by a group of private companies each with its own activity (Belica, 1996). The majority of these companies have been working for the municipality up until now (1997). In some cases cities replaced unsatisfactory contractors with new ones, many having foreign partners, which have a stronger capital and know-how background (and which often also serve the surrounding region).

Nevertheless, there are cities which prefer to retain direct control of city services. Trenčín established a multifunctional municipal enterprise 'MHT' (with a divisional internal-organisational structure) in 1997; MHT is responsible for waste collection, green spaces, road maintenance, city lighting, parking, market places, etc and has had positive cost effects (Rybníček, 1998). Cities have also established many new legal entities which have received regular subventions for their functioning; in particular these are concerned with cultural centres, libraries, cinemas, galleries, museums, and various social services centres. They are able to generate some income, but even with commercialisation they are not able to cover all their costs. The attempts to find a more suitable decentralised form for the management of cultural facilities have been almost uninterrupted since 1990 (for example, in Poprad). Decentralisation to the private sector through municipalisation has been common in housing: cities are selling their municipal housing stock to tenants at favourable rates. Only about 10% of the original housing stock has been retained as council housing for social purposes.

The decentralisation to mixed public – private local companies is based on setting up new entities with private partners, or inviting private partners into older municipal enterprises under the transformation process. Cities have developed the majority of their bigger investment projects in partnerships with the private sector (Lučenec is one of the best cases). Local self-governments have also become partners in the privatisation process of local facilities or companies. Such decentralisation through public – private privatisation projects concerns important facilities and infrastructure which will be privatised later: for example, local airports (Trenčín, Žilina), water and sewage systems (Trenčín), and health services (Banská Bystrica). Cities and associations of municipalities with developed private partners have prepared privatisation projects to increase the chances of a successful result. They consider this form to be a suitable combination of private partners' expertise and their own ability to influence the corporations which control important local facilities. For example, as a result of privatisation, the city owns 20% of the shares in the local mass-transport company (buses and trolley buses) in Žilina (Rajecký, 1996).

Thanks to the liberal legal environment, cities decentralise, also paradoxically, from below 'by self-governments'. They are active in attracting functions which previously had been entirely in state hands and concentrated in selected central cities. This is most visible in the field of higher education (the university level). They have offered coverage of part of their running costs and suitable buildings (Poprad, Lučenec, Michalovce). Mixed state – municipal institutions are one result of decentralisation. Although elementary and secondary schools are still mostly under state control, self-governments cooperate with schools in covering part of their expenditures. It is weakness, financial scarcity in the state sector during the transitional period, and the ambitious strategies of municipalities combined with a refusal to accept the decline of state-delivered functions in cities, which have led to the situation where formally state-delivered functions are delivered by state – municipal or even state – municipal – private partnerships. This combination of all sectors' resources allows the survival and particular quality standard of delivery of some local services (for example, local education and culture).

Sublocal decentralisation to the third sector

The important counter trend to the diminishing level of local participation and a complementary part of democratic development is the growing position of the so-called 'third sector' activities in Slovak cities. The decentralisation of this sector may be seen in the growing number, functional expansion, and greater participation of many nonprofit nongovernmental voluntary groups, associations in local life, and local government. Third-sector activities are a suitable arena for active citizens, for people who want to participate in public life, to work for the city and the local community, and who do not want to be involved in party politics or compete for public posts.

Slovak cities have a long tradition of an active role being played by various local associations, as was described by Mannová (1998), and, in great detail, by Drenko (1997). Some of them were very influential in local life and the control of local development. These associative traditions have been renewed in cities since the political changes. The role and position of the third sector in cities started to grow in particular after 1994. Many of the former activists involved in the 1989 revolution in Slovakia were reluctant to continue to work within the structures of political parties, and were dissatisfied with political life and with the persistent inability to react promptly to problems emerging in local society. In many cases, these active members of Slovak society turned their attention toward the local level via voluntary nonprofit activities, participating in local civil society building. Third-sector organisations are strongly problem-oriented and cooperate with various local institutions, although their work is now really globalised (in the training of leading activists, staff, financing, networking).

At the urban level, the functions of the third sector cover almost all the functions typical of nongovernmental organisations as described in Bútora (1998) and Smith (1996). There are organisations concerned with the collection and expression of citizens' opinions and requirements, questioning the performance of local self-government. Some of them, like the Prešov Informal Association, monitor the local situation in many fields and offer alternative solutions (in 1997, this association had about eighty organisations as members). They deliver services and carry out voluntary work (for example, various forms of social services, care of the elderly, homeless, etc, in almost all cities). They are involved in mediation and the prevention of conflict (Centre for Local Democracy Lučenec, Project of Preventive Diplomacy). These Associations are also sources of development strategies. They form local growth coalitions or local think tanks that include the main personalities from the local public sphere, business, culture, and educational life. The 'Casino Club' in Lučenec (originally established in 1833 and renewed in modernised form after 1989) is strongly influencing the development strategy of the city. A similar, more exclusive, club of local notables in Žilina ('Klub Žilincov') regularly presents initiatives to the city council. All cities are rich in other, more problem-oriented, associations, foundations, activist groups, etc, with citywide or more local activities. The scope of their activities is unlimited, and they are systematically searching for new fields of activity.

After rapid development within the last few years, the third sector has become very important in local life. The majority of organisations are now functioning better and more effectively. The latest stage of development of the third sector is the start of 'community foundations'—these are now active in almost all of the cities studied. One of the most successful is the Trenčín Informal Association (TIA), established in 1994. The aim of the TIA, as an umbrella association, is "the support and development of local democracy, community philanthropy and community ..." (TIA, 1997). It is a group of about thirty nongovernmental and nonprofitmaking organisations, who have preserved their individual autonomy. They coordinate their activities, are active in

organising discussion among various interest groups within the city, and are making great efforts to identify problems within the city. The TIA has its own programme of small grants (eighty-seven projects received grants in 1997). In solving these problems, they try to work together with the groups' own capacities. Individual associations and citizen's initiatives are active in social and environmental issues, local culture, youth, sport, education, and charitable projects. Most cities now have centres servicing third-sector activities, as a basis for their further development and growth and the service of the wider region.

The majority of local associations cooperate very closely with city self-governments. City councils have their own grant programmes within the city budget for the support of voluntary activities. The initiatives of the third sector receive financial support on an individual basis, each being an item in the city budget (for bigger projects, in the main, as is the case in the City of Poprad and support for the 'Winter Olympic Games 2006 Foundation', and the 'Mountain Film Foundation'). Such support is often included within specific city budget items (for example, the City of Žilina has supported various associations, foundations, and church societies with a sum exceeding 2 million Slovak crowns in 1996). Cities create specific general grant funds for the support of activities outside the municipal sector (for example, the City of Trnava City Grants Fund). The City of Nitra established a special fund—'Pro Nitra'—for the support of culture, and the 'Pribina Fund' for the support of sport. The incomes of these two funds are based on income from gambling machines located in the city, and transfers from the city budget (in 1995, the Pro Nitria Fund supported fifty-three different activities, with a sum exceeding 800 000 Slovak crowns). Although financial transfers from city budgets to third-sector activities usually vary between 0.5% and 1% of their total noninvestment budgets, these funds are among the most effectively used expenditures. These smaller grants are usually added to by resources attracted from the private sector and from large national and international donors and foundations, as well as money raised as a result of huge voluntary efforts of activists. Their important role in local democracy, citizens' mobilisation, and participation in local life is indisputable.

Conclusion

At the local level, the transformation processes are far from complete in Slovakia, but new features have been achieved during the early stage of the consolidation period (1994–98). The introduction of main representative and executive local institutions, which create a basic framework for local democracy, was the main goal during the initial period of transformation. It had been essential that basic democratic rules for the local level were defined from above, in particular to avoid any misuse of local institutions—especially during the first stages of the reforms. The most important change is that the top-down control of transformation, which dominated the initial period, is now combined with a much more active role of the local level. The success of transition toward a democratic society and market is dependent on more autonomously organised development at the local level. Sublocal decentralisation has played an important role in this local adaptation to new conditions. Its main influence concerns the improvement of local democracy, higher efficiency in service delivery, and the support of civil society building. Local self-governments, which have had a crucial role in these processes, have confirmed their flexibility and ability to cope with more specific local transformation issues in a long-term perspective. They have responded actively to local conditions, used more liberal legislature and its available level of autonomy, and applied diverse forms of management. Local self-government did not hesitate to introduce new institutions according to local needs. Decentralisation processes have also been instrumental in avoiding the danger of devaluing local self-government. Local self-government

has preserved particular regulatory rights for influencing many local actors and companies outside the public sector, in particular in order to ensure the best possible responses to citizens/customers' requirements, even after decentralisation. Growing local experience and capacities are arguments for more extensive decentralisation from the state to local self-governments in the future.

The experiences of Slovak cities demonstrate the need for a more complex local democracy. The creation of the basic institutions of local self-government did not satisfy the citizens: after the long period of totalitarian regime, the citizens have not been pleased with the current narrow understanding of local democracy. Their expectations were very high. They have required a local democracy which combines complementary elements of representative, associative, participative, and direct democracy. The processes of complex local democracy building have gained a respected position within the goals of local transformation, but longer periods are required for implementation. The positive developments in the field of local democracy sends a good message for democracy in transitional countries. Democratising decentralisation applied by self-government has been in strong contrast to the people's perception of poor 'central' democracy under Meciar's government (1994 – 98). The local level has become the stronghold of democracy in Slovakia. A particular level of local autonomy and a liberal legal environment have allowed improvements in democratic practices at the local level, compared with the democracy deficit at the central level. From this point of view, the local level is not only an important 'detail' in the democratisation of a society under transition, but can also play an important role in its protection.

Municipalities can play a facilitating role in the development of civil society (Smith, 1998) and the case of Slovakia shows that local civil society building during a transformation period is hardly possible unless local self-government plays an active role. Its role in the support of local civil society building is manyfold. Local self-government may support numerous associations, activist groups, and citizens' initiatives which have very limited resources and facilities of their own, or which would otherwise rely on scarce resources from a local private sector facing transitional problems in the local economy. This development creates very strong ties between local civil society and local self-government, which is very promising for the future of local life. This relationship between local self-government and local civil society is based on partnership, with no attempts at domination or dependence. The fact that activity from below is welcomed and supported creates a more cooperative, but also a more demanding, spirit within the locality. Decentralised sublocal institutions offer a new level of interaction for closer cooperation with growing third-sector activities. Their numerous local activities can hardly be discussed at the city level of self-government. Their interactions with sublocal institutions lead to better, more effective, and more precisely oriented third-sector local activities. A sublocal environment of cooperation, networking, overlapping of interest, and civil engagement is growing.

Decentralisation is an important condition for more efficient local functioning. Financial scarcity during the initial period of transformation at the local level caused the first pressures leading to the adoption of cost-effective methods of management and new forms of service delivery. More efficient private or mixed companies began to operate in the service-delivery sector early in the first years of transition. Current development is typified by the penetration of newly emerging third-sector bodies into the previously municipal sphere. Sublocal institutions have put pressure on local self-government bodies and on service-delivery companies. This increases the chances of improving responsiveness to citizens' requirements, including efficient service delivery and spatially more proportional local development. The plurality of institutions and the more interlinked environment is helpful in building a more effective local society.

The success of transformation in big cities is very important for countries in transition, like Slovakia. They are cores of all social changes, centres of development, and nodes of diffusion of new experiences down the settlement system. That they function well, democratically, and is necessary for the country, as well as for local citizens. The situation of Slovak cities illustrates particular problems of government in postcommunist cities. Dissatisfaction with poorly functioning local self-government, an increase in citizens' passivity, loss of confidence in local democratic institutions, and persistently inefficient services can, ultimately, threaten progress in transition. Decentralisation and flexible local self-government can improve this gloomy and pessimistic perspective. The decentralisation from the local to the sublocal level can be an important factor in success of transformation. Many specific local conditions can be accepted if the legislature is liberal enough and allows sufficient flexibility. Sublocal decentralisation, especially quasi-two-tier forms of local self-government, offer an interesting alternative for the organisation of more democratic, more responsive, local government which is suitable for many cities in Central and Eastern Europe. Sublocal institutions are particularly appropriate for integrated villages, which are often outside the compact urban environment and are interested in 'more authentic' local self-government. Sublocal institutions are also ideally suited to local identity-building processes in young settlement structures, such as the high-rise housing estates that were established during intraurban migration and the widespread immigration into the postcommunist cities. Decisionmaking may adopt a more proportional perspective, in which concentration on city-centre development or big development projects is balanced against spatially nonsensitive political approaches. The creation of subunits which are too large, as well as differences between the work of sublocal institutions, should be mentioned among the problems related to the experiences with political decentralisation in Slovakia. Preference should be given to public – private, private, and third sectors having roles in local affairs which are limited to managerial spatial sublocal decentralisation (although the more or less symbolic value of local centres can be useful in some cases). It seems sensible that sublocal political institutions should not be directly involved in the delivery of public services. The most appropriate size for units in political sublocal decentralisation is, in general, smaller than the optimum size of individual service delivery units. The ongoing processes of mutual learning and the transfer of experiences between Slovak cities are positive factors accelerating local adaptation.

The trend toward local governance which has been discussed intensively in local government studies (for example, Andrew and Goldsmith, 1998; Walsh, 1996) may also be observed in Slovak cities. Especially prominent are the tendencies toward higher participation and improved responsiveness, strengthening of individual, and spatial equality within the city, plurality of local bodies performing local service functions, and higher local institutional richness, including the rising role of local civil society. By the process of sublocal decentralisation, local self-governments have decentralised various functions, have become much more open, and shifted themselves more to the role of coordinator; higher priority is given to enabling than to providing, but these self-governments still remain crucial local decisionmaking bodies. Institutions of representative democracy have a central role thanks to the leading position of mayors and city councils. Nevertheless, cooperation, networking, negotiation, various forms of communication, and mutual support of various local institutions have all become more typical features of local governance in the transition society. These local trends in government and transformation increase the likelihood of the successful completion of the consolidation period at the local level.

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APPENDIX

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