Selected Aspects of Candidates Standing in Local Elections in the Slovak Republic

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Abstract: *TIn an environment of general dissatisfaction with public affairs it is interesting to see that voter turnout in municipal elections remains relatively constant. Although it only moderately fluctuates around 50% of eligible voters, even elections to local government are registering an increase in the negative context of general disgust with politics. One of the phenomena demonstrating this trend is the higher number of elected nonpartisan deputies. The media in particular portrayed the recent election to local governments as the victory of independent candidates over the candidates of political parties. This paper aims to analyze candidates in the 2010 municipal elections and the differences in the opinions and attitudes of councillors in municipalities of 10,000+ inhabitants in the electoral period 2010–2014. As the focus is on the potential conflict in the views of party-affiliated candidates and non-party candidates, the main question is: Could the growing support for independent candidates be based on the differences between independent candidates and political candidates?*

Keywords: *municipal elections, independent candidates, Slovak Republic*

Political parties and their candidates at the local level

Political science has always focused on studying the way political parties function at the national level. Taking various forms when applied practically, the classic

representative democracy considers political parties a necessary element of the life of democracy. The parties carry the will of the people, implementing it through their nominees. Only later did emerge theories that adopted a critical view of their impact. Today, these are no longer in the minority against models that continue to insist on the necessity of political parties. Participatory, communal, and direct democracy all place an emphasis on shifting the essence of decision-making back to citizens. In terms of local administration, however, the operations of political parties at the local level remain overshadowed by national politics despite the fact that the turnout indicates that to the public, communal scene is the top priority, second only to national politics. As reported by Šaradín and Ryšavý (2010), the correlation between the size of a municipality and relevance of political parties is bordering trivial, described in literature even by authors based in stable democracies. In this respect, Slovakia is no exception, although it needs to be pointed out that this is a fairly logical assumption given the extreme fragmentation of its settlement patterns. This is to some degree due to the markedly contradictory processes that were part of the organization and reorganization of public administration carried out by both the democratic and undemocratic regimes that ruled Slovakia in the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1950 and 1989 the number of municipalities dropped from 3,344 to 2,694. After the fall of the undemocratic regime, the number of municipalities rose to 2,891 since 1992. (Machyniak and Šebík 2013) After the conditions for municipality classification were liberalized, however, this trend stopped partly thanks to their re-tightening. For example, although a controlled merge in Hungary yielded a 55 % reduction in the number of municipalities, in 1992 this number not only returned to the 1962 level, but the country reported 111 more municipalities, which represents a 3 % increase (Swianiewicz 2003). The trend is similar in Western Europe and other advanced western democracies.

Our analysis leans on the current situation: a total of 2,930 municipalities, of which 177 are cities and boroughs. More important than the total number of municipalities is dividing them by size, and in this case our calculations clearly illustrate the (non)consolidation of settlement patterns. As of today, Slovakia has 1,901 municipalities with less than a thousand inhabitants. This does not affect economic efficiency despite the fact that in small-scale municipalities, the elected officials typically do not receive any monetary compensation. This contrasts with the disproportionately high salaries of mayors in other and larger municipalities. Consequently, officials are unable to carry out basic local administration coupled with state administration. Likewise, the smaller the municipality the more challenging it is to ensure competitiveness of the electoral process. For example municipalities Solník, Baňa, Krišľovce, Lackov, Dubno and Harakovce were unable to hold regular mayor elections or supplementary elections in the period 2010–2014 because not one resident of the municipalities wanted to candidate. In other small municipalities it is quite common

to have only one candidate running for the office. Specifically, this has happened in Baňa, Brezinka, Jakušovce, Korunková, Kožuchovce, Kručov, Lomné, Makovce, Nižná Olšava, Potôčky, Staškovce, Tokajík, Varechovce and Vislava, all part of the district Stropkov. Therefore electoral rivalry cannot be considered a competition in the 14 out of a total of 43 municipalities in the Stropkov district. As this occurs also outside the regions of eastern Slovakia, no wonder that the supplementary elections for the administration period of 2010–2014 had to be held up to 9 times. The last supplementary mayoral election held before the regular election in November 2014 was to take place in 8 municipalities, but three of them could not find any candidates to nominate. In the said Harakovce, no supplementary election could be held in the entire period as none of the inhabitants of this municipality lying in the Poprad district was interested in the office. The western parts of Slovakia also suffer from an insufficient number of nominees: in the October 2012 election, three municipalities of this region formally confirmed a candidate that lacked an electoral opponent. Although the absolute figures are not high, the number of municipalities with only one candidate would be even higher if we included municipal elections held on the original date. Organizing and running a general election is a major challenge for small-scale municipalities. Act No. 346/1990 Coll., stipulates that the district election commission shall consist of at least five members, but none of its members are allowed to run for office of the mayor or council official (Act No. 346/1990 Coll., on local elections, Section 15). Meeting this condition is difficult for some municipalities.

The diminishing importance of political parties at the local level is a general trend common to both the parts of Europe that was once divided by the Iron Curtain. The trend affects municipal elections in Reykjavik, capital of Iceland, as well as Trnava, a regional capital in Slovakia. We chose these cities as an example on purpose, as immediately after the news of their win in the municipal election, both the candidates became nationally famous. Although Peter Bročka, winner of the recent Trnava mayoral election, is not as popular as Jón Gnarr in Iceland, these two local political figures share, besides a number of traits, one characteristic — distancing themselves from the politics of classic political parties that are often discredited even at the local level. Profiling themselves as independent candidates secured them the votes of disappointed voters, which only confirms the process termed New Public Culture, or New Politics by American sociologist Terry Clark, which began in the 1970s (Clark and Hofmann-Martinot 1998). The success of independent candidates in cities can be attributed to the fact that post-materialist societies in rich cities now focus on issues that traditional political parties fail to respond to. This process challenges the above mentioned premise of interdependence between the success or importance of a political party and municipal size.

This paper aims to analyze candidates in the 2010 municipal elections and the differences in the opinions and attitudes of councillors in municipalities of 10,000+ inhabitants in the electoral period 2010–2014. As the focus is on the potential conflict in the views of party-affiliated candidates and non-party candidates, the main question is: Could the growing support for independent candidates be based on the differences between independent candidates and political candidates?

Based on studies conducted by other authors in the post-communist countries in Central Europe, Šaradín and Ryšavý (2010) identify four main reasons behind the weak position political parties face at the local level:

- low memberships of political parties or a gradual decline in active membership coupled with poor organizational penetration into lower layers of local administration;
- the fact that political parties were not, particularly in small municipalities, deemed necessary for democracy;
- low credit given to party affiliation in the eyes of the public and municipal councillors themselves;
- and finally, low levels of trust in political parties in general, which contrasts with the high levels of confidence in the local councils.

Do the abovementioned factors help shape local administration in Slovakia? Does this mean that political parties are weak at the local level? Dropping membership rates are now clearly a trend even in the case of Slovak political parties. The best example of discredited party life from the socialist times is the ex-communist SDL, which boasted 190,000 members in 1980s, while after the re-registration in 1991, the rates fell to 45,000. Yet, at that time it had the largest membership base among all political parties. (Rybář 2011) Efforts to analyze the entire history of Slovakia in terms of the number of members of political parties are hampered by lack of information, until the adoption of Act No. 85/2005 Coll. on political parties and political movements. The occasional reports on the total number indicate that the golden era of party-membership lasted in Slovakia until the late 1990s. In 2001, then, the 10 leading political parties registered over 145,000 members. After it was established that political parties are obliged to publish their membership counts, the data have been more precise, pointing at a slight decrease in nearly all relevant political parties. Chart 1 showcases this trend.

Chart 1: Development of political party memberships in Slovakia
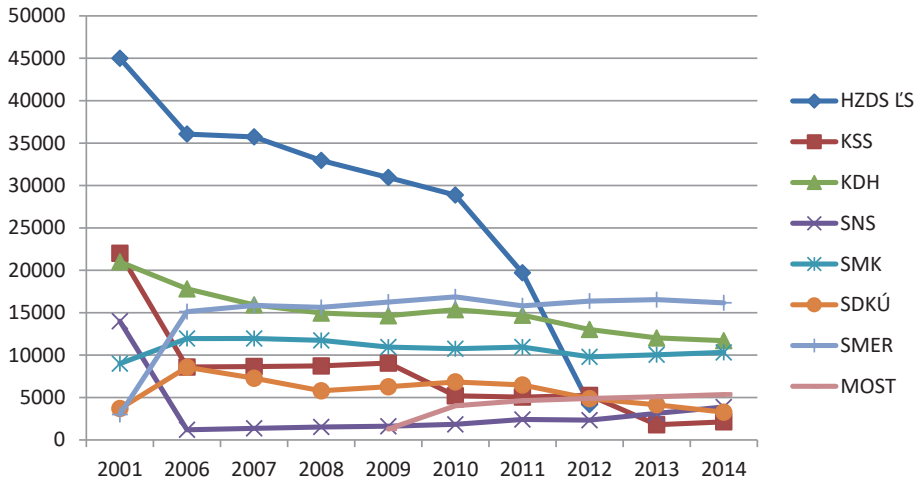
Source: Author's analysis based on annual reports issued by political parties, 2001–2010.

In 2015, active political parties, 48 in total, registered as few as 91,669 members altogether. The largest political party is SMER SD with its 16,167 registered members, having gained a substantial edge over other political parties. The second largest is KDH with about 11,700 members. The political party SMK-MKP is third, having long held the largest membership until it split in 2009, after which the member rates dropped to 10,000. Next follows MOST-HÍD with 5,350 members and the non-parliamentary SNS with 5,150 members. SDKÚ DS has been experiencing a rapid decline in both votes and membership, scoring less than 3,000 members at present. Even lower are parties that are non-parliamentary only: KSS — 2,100 members, Sieť — 1,829 and NOVA — 1,220. The lowest ranks are occupied, as usual, by SaS and OĽaNO. The liberal SAS currently registers 166 members, while OĽaNO is the smallest Slovak political party with four founding members. The character and status of the party membership is also closely linked to the internal democratic organization. Rybář reports that in 2011 only KDH, SDĽ and SMK-MKP had implemented a bottom-up model, which provides an idea of how important local organizations of the party are for its political life. This is illustrated by the fact that until 2006, the 34 founding members of the party had enjoyed a privileged status in SMER. (Rybář 2011) Although this model has changed to a degree, the example above only demonstrates the unwillingness of the top management of political parties to transfer responsibilities to regional or district offices. If, moreover, the local offices find themselves in conflict with the leadership, they are closed down, as was the case with SDKÚ DS in January 2013: the Nitra branch was dissolved. (SME 2013)

Given the large number of municipalities, and the current number of members of political parties, we may state that despite the decline in membership, Slovak political parties continue to have enough personnel and funds to fill all the deputy posts in municipal councils. Theoretically, if political parties nominated all their members and delegated non-members in the commissions, there would have been 4 to 5 candidates of political parties running for every mandate in the last election. However, if we consider the total number of municipal council posts that needed to be filled in the electorate years, not even the largest political party of today, SMER SD would have enough members to theoretically cover all the mandates in municipal councils, as while in 2014 it had 16,167 members, there were 20,786 posts to be occupied in the municipal elections that year. If the Party theoretically tried to fill the seats in all the municipalities, it would have 5-6 mandates in each. Although the overall count of members of the five largest parties exceeds the total amount of mandates distributed in the election, this is a rapid decline in membership compared with the past, which shows in the limited electoral choice.

Let us go back to the assumption mentioned early in the text. We will verify the prerequisite of a successful political party and the size of a municipality. The results of correlation analysis for municipal size categories are unambiguous. There is a significant relationship between the success rates of political coalitions and the municipal size, as the percentage of obtained mandates grows in direct proportion with the municipal size. Likewise, there is dependence between municipality size and the election success of a political party, where the percentage gain of a political party drops as the size increases. Although the results are clear, this does not mean declining or growing overall success rates of political parties. If the pinnacle of a politization of municipal election was the formation of coalitions as the highest manifestation of political parties dominating the electoral process, this could serve to confirm this trend. We must realize that at the same time the gains of the candidacy continuously decrease as well. Overall, the dependence is not linear, and in the smallest municipalities the political parties and their coalitions won 80 % of the mandates and in the largest cities 88 %. The initial gain in the smallest municipalities gradually decreases until reaching the lowest value in midsize cities, and then again grows until finally scoring 88 % in Bratislava, Košice and the borough Petržalka. Could we then claim that waning membership affects the weak status of political parties at the local level? We unequivocally confirm a gradual decline in registered membership in Slovak political parties. Yet, their candidates are able to fill the large majority of mandates in small municipalities, despite the fact that the larger the municipality the less successful they gradually are, until their success rates in regional cities match those they enjoy in the smallest towns. This trend, however, owes to the fact that candidates do not need to be members of political parties. At the lowest level, candidates seek the support of political parties even if formally they are not members.

Table 1: Success of political parties and their coalitions by municipal size

|	PP	Coalition	NEKA
0–999	77.49 %	3.72 %	18.79 %
1,000–1,999	66.69 %	5.37 %	27.93 %
2,000–4,999	69.03 %	8.29 %	22.67 %
5,000–9,999	53.71 %	14.59 %	31.70 %
10,000–19,999	38.94 %	26.96 %	34.11 %
20,000–59,999	31.20 %	44.94 %	23.85 %
60,000–99,999	13.33 %	67.22 %	19.44 %
100,000–500,000	3.85 %	84.62 %	11.54 %
Pearson r	-0.984	0.949	-0.344

Source: Author's calculations based on data of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2010.

Table 2: Developments in the number of elected councillors in each municipal election

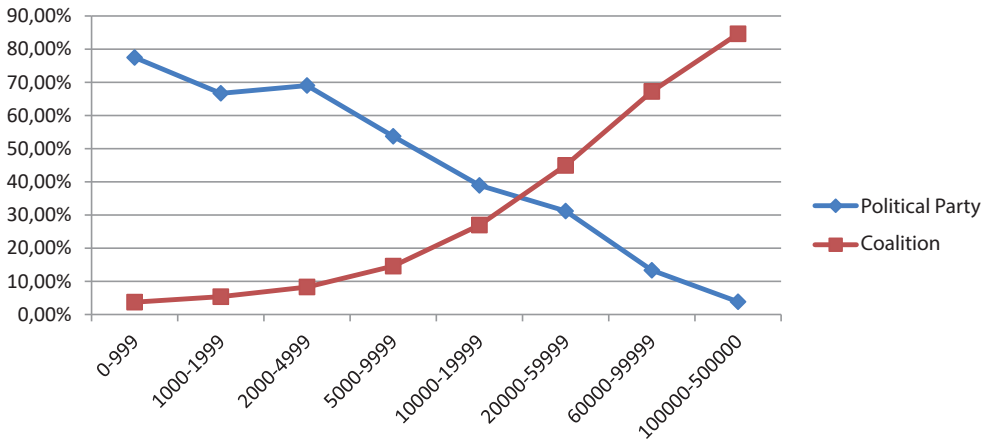| 1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
38,490	35,139	35,616	21,644	21,337	21,032	20,786

Source: Author's analysis of the SO SR data, 1990–2014.

Chart 2: Success of political parties and their coalitions (%)
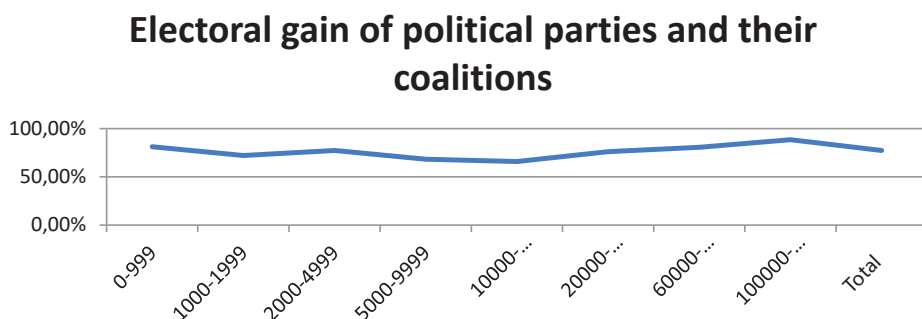
Source: Author's analysis of the SO SR data.

Chart 3: Percentage growth of political parties and coalitions by municipality size

Source: Author's analysis of the SO SR data, 2010.

Now we will verify whether political parties were considered essential for democracy in the Slovak towns and cities. No empirical research on this topic is available as of today. Some clues, however, may be derived from the assessment of individual types of national committees during communism. National committees were fully governed by decisions made by a superior NC, and besides this administration hierarchy-based subordination, they were also subject to political and personnel control by the party. Although this system inhibited any autonomy, we must highlight the specific status of the lowest elements - city and local national committees. Act No. 69/1967 Coll. Art. 2 did provide NCs with autonomy, because national committees "as public autonomous authorities, work to meet both the needs of society and the needs and interests pertaining to their territory, especially the development needs of cities and towns, while bringing into compliance nation-wide, local, group and personal interests" (Act No. 69/1967 Coll.). On the one hand, observing the top-down regulations of the centre kept the local NCs under the grip of the regime, but the direct experience of the NC representatives with the consequences of the inefficient government policy forced the NC representatives to compromise. The possibility to involve the public in decision-making through commissions and the reluctant approach of NC representatives to enforcing unpopular decisions, rendered the city and local NCs with a more favourable image in the eyes of the public. This distinguished them from other types of NCs that were more closely connected with the structures of the Communist Party. The way the lowest-ranking committees worked created, especially towards the end of the communist regime, conditions for functional local administration (Valeš et al. 2006).

The third argument of Šaradín and Ryšavý is based on the Czech experience, where the results of longitudinal sociological surveys after the fall of the regime show the low credit given to political affiliation. Neither the public nor the post-1989 municipal councillors regarded party membership as important. As no such surveys are available for Slovakia, we rely on the findings of our own survey of municipal councils, which produced several questions that now, over 20 years later, illustrate the attitude of the councillors toward the importance of political affiliation. The aim is to evaluate the importance today, and there is no similar data available from the period immediately after the restoration of democracy. Councillors agree in their assessment of the degree to which the representatives of the party, the party clubs and party organizations affect the operation of the municipality concerned. Only 32.1 % of local councillors believe that political leaders have no influence over the operation of the local council. Of interest is how this influence is viewed by the independent, since up to 36.3 % of them report a strong or very strong influence of party representatives, which is more than 10 % more compared with the candidates of political parties. Regarding party clubs sitting on the council, in general councillors believe the clubs have a greater influence compared with party representatives, while party organization has the lowest impact. If the category of some influence were included in the evaluation, it is evident that 67.9 % of all councillors believe that the representatives of political parties have some, a strong or very strong influence over local administration. In the case of influence of a party organization it is 64.4 %, while the strongest influence is exercised by party clubs in a council — up to 82.9 %. Evaluation of the impact of political parties on the council operation reaches high values. This is likely due to the fact that municipal councillors are not isolated from the given political party, as 46.1 % of them meet with the representatives of the party's local organization several times a month or more often. Even more illustrative is the percentage of the party's influence on votes in the event of a conflict of interest. Up to 68.7 % of all the councillors agree that in such a case they should not vote according to what voters or their party want but according to their own beliefs. Furthermore, in this case no fundamental difference was found between political candidates and independent MPs because both the groups strongly prefer to vote in accordance with their own belief. Difference of opinion, however, arises from the degree to which they agree that political parties are the best platform for citizen participation. A total of 51 % of politically affiliated candidates agree or fully agree with the statement. This shows that not even politically affiliated candidates agree on whether citizens should engage in political life through political organizations. Of the independent candidates, 36.4 % agreed or fully agreed with the same question. It should also be noted that both the groups have an approximately equally large group that takes a neutral stance on this statement. Interesting findings concern

the attitudes of local councillors toward the impact of parties on the decision-making of fellow party-members in the local council. Up to 61.3 % of political nominees agree or fully agree with the statement about the influence of the party on votes; the same trend is found in councillors elected as independent candidates. Taking these numbers in consideration in relation to the earlier findings, it is clear that political parties enjoy a relatively strong influence on votes, but only as long as they do not contradict the councillor's own view. The councillor then votes independently of the party's opinion. The last of the analyzed aspects of the political parties and their candidates is the party support during candidacy. Cooperation with national-level politicians is rare for both politically affiliated and independent candidates. While cooperation with the party's central authorities is more common, the greatest support is rendered by local organizations.

Independent candidates at the local level

Krejčí (2004) explains that a politician should possess a broad range of personal qualities, but the success does not come solely thanks to these attributes. Success arrives as a result of a combination of personal qualities and circumstances. Despite their media image and the extraordinary prestige they enjoy due to appearing frequently on television, politicians have varied intellectual and moral capacities. Often they are common, average people, whose only difference is their heightened interest in politics and greater self-esteem. Nowadays politicians employ various media agencies which use mass media to portray the politicians as perfect beings. Through a media construct, PR specialists transform a real human into a strange virtual reality equipped with high intelligence, extraordinary morals and unsurpassed work ethic. It is vital that a politician prevails in power struggles in the form of competitive matches within parties and between parties. It could simply be the person who is the best skilled, not necessarily the best educated or honest. Indeed, it may be the most cynical and ruthless participant in the fight, because these are highly useful qualities in political competition. Political alienation and mistrust in political parties in Slovakia are the reasons why politicians are generally perceived as the representatives of group egotism, private agreements, major ambitions and lack of tolerance.

Could the desire for power be why individuals engage in politics? Efforts to understand the reasons why some people enter politics professionally are one of the most debated and researched themes of political psychology. This topic offers a multitude of conflicting responses. For example, Kathleen McGraw (2003) defines two prominent motives of politicians in democratic politics:

1. Promoting policies that the politician personally prefers or that are preferred by loyal party members
2. Seeking re-election.

Are there any deeper motives behind the desire to carry out own political goals or become re-elected? Those with a moralizing view of politics see it as a realm of vice, ill-will and selfishness. That is why a politician is primarily described as egotistic or extremely career-oriented, capable of betraying friends, ideas and humanity. The political reality of post-communist countries in particular proves that for the sake of their careers, some politicians keep changing political parties and the associated ideological orientation. This mass phenomenon was evident not only after the regime was replaced, with some of the old elites fearing persecution.

Table 3: Gain of independent candidates in elections (% and absolute figures)

1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
15.88	9.0	8.9	13.46	17.10	22.66	28.91
6,111 [*]	3,160	3,183	2,892	3,638	4,764	6,000

[*] The total of 6,111 is the sum of 1,702 candidates who explicitly indicated to be running as independent candidates, of 1,173 candidates who did not specify their party affiliation, and of 3,236 candidates who stood without any party affiliation. These three types of candidates who chose in the first free election to not link their candidacy with any political party, and were registered by the SO SR, only demonstrate the initial depoliticization or disavowal of the policy of political parties in the period immediately after the change of regime.

Source: Author's analysis of the SO SR data, 1990–2014.

We are witnessing an increase in the number of independent candidates. Brancati (2008) determines that one of the simplest and logical reasons is the fact that they are not linked to any party. Societies characterized by relatively high distrust will logically vote more for independent candidates.

While all independent candidates are similar in terms of their party affiliation, they differ in several respects. Many of them are political outsiders with no government experience. These 'lone rangers' often concentrate on a single issue in politics. Many even use their position of an outsider to portray themselves as the only ones who could cleanse the government of corruption and relationships between parties, and successfully negotiate agreements with various parties in favour of their own voters. In contrast, many of the independent are politically experienced. They may have been part of the government as members of political parties or government bureaucracy. Many of these politicians separated from their parties as they disagreed with the direction the party was taking. Other reasons include personal conflicts with party members or dissatisfaction with their place on the list of the candidates of their party.

They can also be defined as politicians with a specific position that does not match the views of political parties. They believe that political parties fail to handle selected issues well. One of the reasons for them to run is to oppose current politicians; they

believe that they could make a difference. Based on these definitions there is no common denominator that would convey the term independent. Some try to win the office because they are dissatisfied with the existing system or are angry, apathetic, without hope. There are also those who use the nomination to improve their own personal, often apolitical goals. (Žuborová et al. 2014) Defining independent candidates and understanding their motives is only the first step toward explaining why independent candidates are stronger in some countries than in others.

Comparison of independent vs. politically affiliated candidates

Independent candidates are not politically affiliated with a single party. In the most basic sense, not being politically affiliated means that in an election, the independent candidate's name is listed alone, without the name of a particular political party. However, their politics is not always completely different from the politics of existing political parties, despite the fact that the independent often claim it is. When developing their own programmes, instead of drafting a full political programme, they prepare only a few points.

Before exploring differences in opinion among Slovak municipal councillors, we will study the socio-economic characteristics of councillors with regard to their party affiliation, while paying attention to the average age, proportion of women, and the most typical pre-politics occupations. The purpose of this section is to illustrate the difference between these categories. As the survey we conducted is international, we have data available on other European countries, in particular on Czech local administration. Unfortunately, our data is tied to the electoral period 2010–2014, while in most European countries the data collected relate to the time when it was the predecessors of our respondents who were active in Slovak municipal politics. It is important to place our survey into a broader context and, therefore, we will compare the data with the Czech Republic, as indicated in the research of Šaradín and Ryšavý (2010) and other authors. Due to the different terms of office and time frame of our research, the absolute figures of the countries will not be compared. Instead we will concentrate on the general trend between the categories of the independent and politically affiliated candidates. Such a comparison will show for example, whether in Slovakia too, women are underrepresented among the candidates of political parties. (Nyiri and Vengrof 2005)

Table 4: Sociodemographic indicators of municipal councillors (%, absolute numbers)

	Politically affiliated candidate	Independent	Slovakia average
Age	52.32	50.95	51.99
Women (%)	21.7	18.56	23.24
Councillors with university qualifications (%)	80.8	84.0	81.4
Type of occupation prior to election (%)	businessman 21.6 engineer 17.3 public servant 13.51	school teacher 20.5 liberal profession 19.3 public servant 17.05	businessman 17.7 engineer 15.6 public servant 15.0

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012–2013. (N= 351)

As is evident, the sociodemographics of elected political candidates differ from those of their independent colleagues. The average municipal councillor elected as an independent candidate is younger compared with his or her colleague affiliated with a political party; the converted difference between these two categories is one and a half years. In Czech municipalities with a population of 10,000+, the average age in the two groups is near-perfectly balanced, with a difference of 0.2 %. The said difference is in favour of older Czech independent candidates. Slovak cities are therefore clearly different with their younger independent candidates, which does not validate the assumption that political parties and municipal politics would serve as a gateway to political life. This issue will be discussed in detail in the differences in attitude and opinion.

The second basic characteristic is the proportion of women. In this case, Slovak municipalities are again different from Czech cities, as Slovak female councillors tend to be more often members of political parties than independent candidates. While interpreting the opposite trend in the Czech Republic, the Czech authors rely on the examples of European parliaments, where the higher selectivity of political parties is due to obstacles in the nomination processes. In the context of the Slovak local administration, too much selectivity is not practised by Slovak political parties, given the high number of municipalities. In nominations, the parties are unable to select from such a large number of potential candidates.

A very high percentage of councillors have university qualifications. The vast majority (80.8 %) of politically affiliated candidates completed undergraduate studies, which is, however, still less than in the case of independent candidates, of whom up to 84 % name their university degree on the ballot. The Czech municipal politics

register the same trend, but with a significantly higher differentiation, with an average of 9 % more independent candidates with university qualifications. According to Swianiewicz and Mielczarek (2005), in Poland and Hungary the trend is opposite, with party-affiliated councillors achieving higher education compared with the independent candidates. Both the education and the post-nominal letters appearing on the ballot may help attract voters to the political party. In the other V4 countries, the impact of higher education on the electoral success could be established with an analysis of preferential voting, but as discussed in the chapter on the electoral system in Slovakia, Slovak election procedures are not based on granting votes to a political party, and thus it is impossible to verify the process of securing a place on the ballot because of a university degree.

The level of completed education is partly linked to another indicator of the socio-demographic background of municipal respondents, as working in a selected liberal profession (lawyer, doctor of medicine, etc.) is preconditioned by acquiring the relevant university degree. Chart 4 shows the independent and the politically-affiliated candidates by occupation.

Chart 4: Municipal councillors by occupation
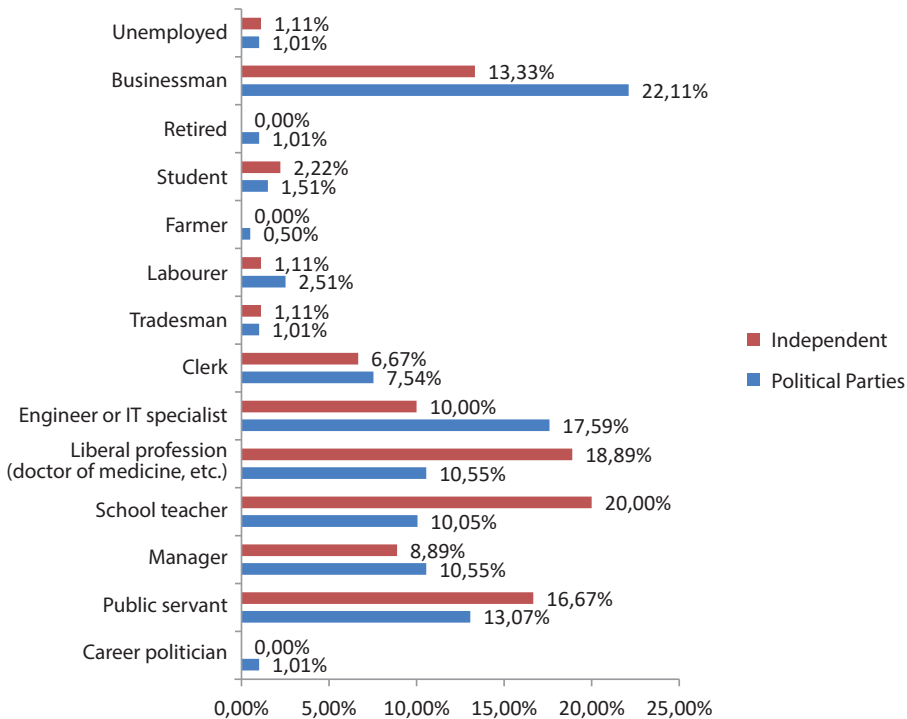
Source: Author's own calculations; Municipal Council Transformations, 2012–2013. (N= 351)

The majority of occupations of the independent candidates are conditioned by university education. Prior to entering politics, every fifth councillor was a teacher, and these are closely followed by a group of liberal professions. The third highest number of councillors came from the public service sector. More than 10 % of councillors were also businessmen and engineers. Regarding the candidates of political parties, the most prevalent are businessmen (over 20 %). The second most common occupation is an engineer and the third place is held by public servants, who are followed by managers. The occupations that topped the independent — teachers and liberal professions — are even less common. In this context we are reminded of Illner's hypothesis, who at the beginning of the 1990s predicted that the first apolitical representation would be later replaced by a stronger party-minded one, which will moreover be connected to municipal economic life. Greatly simplifying, we could argue that this trend has been partially confirmed as every fifth councillor from among the political parties comes from the business environment. The calculation of the most numerous occupations of politically affiliated candidates clearly shows that political parties choose candidates connected with the economic life of a municipality and logically also public service.

The socio-demographic profile suggested the background of municipal councillors in Slovakia. What made them step in this direction, and how long do they retain office? The following comparison that focuses on reasons for running, support rendered by those involved in the local political and social life, current political views, and future political prospects, will greatly help to determine whether independent candidates and their politically-affiliated colleagues are truly different from each other.

Comparing the mean values of individual responses to questions related to the reasons for running, we may contend that the most common reason for politically-affiliated candidates to run is the need to represent the interests of the group the deputy advocates for. This is the only reason for running whose mean responses are higher than value 3, which marks the answer as very important. The percentage shows even more clearly what value councillors ascribe to this motive for political engagement. As many as over 84 % consider this very important and extremely important. Self-reflecting on their motives to run, the independent likewise rate high the above mentioned reason, as evidenced by the 75 % given to great or extreme importance. However, much higher means are registered among the independent in terms of an idealistic view of politics — community engagement as a duty of every citizen. Based on importance the candidates rank the reasons as follows: Represent the Needs of a Group I Represent, Influence Specific Issues, and Community Engagement as a Civic Duty. Trailing far behind were General Interest in Politics, Control Administration, Do a Good Job for the Party, and at the very bottom were Learn How the Political System Works and Social Networking. Starting a Political Career is the

least important reason for the candidates of political parties. The independent share the same first three reasons, albeit in a slightly different order. More interestingly, the difference between the said three most important reasons and the remaining ones is much greater than in the case of the politically-affiliated candidates. These range from little to moderately important. Councillors attach moderate importance to General Interest in Politics, which fills a gap in the importance. The public sees the independent candidates as the opposite of the politically-affiliated candidates particularly in relation to defending personal and party interests. Citizens negatively perceive political parties, with independent candidates representing a more acceptable alternative. Comparison of the reasons to candidate nevertheless reveals a slight difference between the independent and the party members only in Control Administration and logically in the importance of defending the interests of the party. Regarding Control Administration, this is paradoxically less important for independent candidates. In summary, no substantial dividing line was found between the independent candidates and the politically-affiliated ones that would distinguish one from the other in their entry into politics. They both attach the utmost importance to a group of the same reasons, considering the remaining motives to run as much less important. The data clearly establish that in neither of the cases do the candidates see local politics as a chance to start a political career. Likewise, we have proved that candidacy does not serve as a means to a higher control of public administration.

Table 5: Mean importance of reasons for running of first-time candidates

Reason for candidacy:	General interest in politics	Represent the needs of a group I represent	Learn how the political system works	Do a good job for the sake of my party	Control administration	Social networking	Start a political career	Influence specific issues	Community engagement is a civic duty
of a political party	2.6244	3.0817	2.1932	2.2379	2.2451	1.8146	1.3043	2.9952	2.8571
regional party	2.2381	2.6667	2.0000	1.6667	2.0000	1.8095	1.1579	2.3500	2.6667
independent	2.4063	2.9375	1.9579	1.0114	1.9263	1.7789	1.1290	2.9053	2.9457
Total	2.5342	3.0123	2.1115	1.8571	2.1344	1.8037	1.2445	2.9288	2.8700

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012-2013. (N= 351)

Our findings indicate that an important divider of the politically-affiliated and the independent candidates is the support the candidate receives from social, po-

litical and economic areas. The self-reflection assessment of support in the latest election clearly demonstrates that independent candidates enter the municipal election without any major support from any of the groups, not only from the political sphere; the importance threshold is slightly exceeded only by mean support for local prominent citizens and local voluntary associations. Excepting the associations, politically-affiliated candidates always receive a greater support from the groups. A higher degree of links between political candidates and the business environment is also confirmed by data on the importance of groups during candidacy.

Table 6: Mean rate of support in recent election

Support for groups:	your party's central authorities	your party at the local level	national-level politicians	locally important citizens	local business groups	local media	churches	local voluntary organizations
political parties	1.7610	2.7476	1.3971	1.7971	1.1739	1.1449	.6927	.9902
regional parties	.7895	1.6500	.4211	1.1053	.7368	.1579	.3158	.3500
independent	.2529	.3103	.2247	1.3043	.6067	.6778	.5057	1.1075
Total	1.2797	2.0095	1.0032	1.6132	.9873	.9525	.6174	.9843

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012–2013. (N= 351)

Before evaluating the political career in local politics, we need to assess how long such a local career is. In this case, it is not true that independent councillors would be junior in their office, as the average time for which councillors are in office is similar for both the groups. This interpretation is supported also by the percentage of electoral period in which the two types of councillors are. This is also illustrative of whether candidates manage to retain their office. The ratio of municipal councillors that have managed to win in all the elections held so far, is balanced, ranging with minimum deviations between 5.3 % and 5.6 %.

Table 7: Duration of term of office

		Term of office (% representation)					Mean duration of office (years)
		1	2	3	4	5	
Candidate:	**political parties**	45.2 %	25.4 %	15.2 %	8.6 %	5.6 %	7.74
	regional parties	66.7 %	14.3 %	14.3 %		4.8 %	5.91
	Independent	48.9 %	22.3 %	19.1 %	4.3 %	5.3 %	7.23
Total		47.8 %	23.7 %	16.3 %	6.7 %	5.4 %	7.46

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012-2013. (N= 351)

Another of the analyzed differences is the importance of the individual duties of local council. Aside from the obvious exception of enforcing the programme of a political party, almost no differences can be found in the importance attributed to individual administration duties. According to deputies, the most important task is to define the main goals of the municipality, followed by the control of municipal activities, and informing the local community about problematic issues. Although the order in which the independent and the party-affiliated candidates place other duties is slightly different, there are only limited differences in the importance of all the duties.

Table 8: Perception of the importance of council duties

Importance of council duties:	defining the main goals of the municipality	controlling municipal activities	informing local community about issues	notifying the public before making a decision	explaining council's decisions to citizens	enforcing a PP programme	supporting the mayor and board	troubleshooting community problems	enforcing the views and interests of minorities
political parties	3.3991	3.1963	3.1495	2.9720	3.0374	2.3364	2.7418	2.7418	2.2180
regional parties	3.1818	3.2273	3.1364	3.0909	2.9545	2.2727	2.8182	2.8636	2.3182
independent	3.3824	3.1569	3.0196	2.9216	3.0000	1.3854	2.6931	2.5882	2.2353
Total	3.3798	3.1864	3.1095	2.9645	3.0207	2.0572	2.7321	2.7033	2.2299

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012–2013. (N= 351)

For most of the time since political science came into existence, one of the key debates has revolved around the importance of ideological orientation, divided in simple terms to the left wing and the right wing. Accordingly, political parties and their representatives should be affected by which wing they fall under. Such a clear-cut dichotomous view of politics was challenged from multiple angles, with the theory of cleavage earning the most attention. The environment of transforming countries revised the theory somewhat, and in the political life of transforming societies, an increasing importance was given to the division into ex-communist components and their democratic opposition. This division tends to be equalled to the traditional separation of left and right, but Czech authors gravely challenge such a division in their country, since the left or right preference is more of an expression of an affiliation to two blocks of political groups that have developed in the Czech party system. Swianiewicz and Mielczarek (2005) advocate that Slovakia, together with Hungary,

Estonia, Poland and Bulgaria are countries with councillors divided between those who were active in politics even under the prior regime and democratic councillors who entered politics after 1989. This also required that the independent are at the centre. As the effect of affiliation to a political party and the related declared ideological orientation can be expected in Slovak politics as well, we will turn our focus on the left-right orientation anchored in affiliation to a political party. In the case of the candidates of political parties, the mean self-classification on the international 11 point scale virtually copies the left-right classification of national political parties on the scale (e.g. candidates of the SMER political party identify themselves as centre-left and SMK as centre-right). We will therefore be primarily interested in the political outlook of the independent candidates. It is apparent that independent candidates are mostly at the centre, with some bordering centre and far right.

Table 9: Political outlook of independent candidates (% and mean)

	Self-classification: Left-Centre-Right											Mean
Independent	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	5.0900
		3.0 %	3.0 %	10.0 %	10.0 %	44.0 %	7.0 %	18.0 %	4.0 %		1.0 %	

Source: Municipal Council Transformations in European perspective, 2012–2013. (N= 351)

Already the preceding view of self-classification of political outlook inherently carries a condition of belonging to a political party. The question is the degree to which party affiliation affects the vote in the event of a conflict between the councillor's opinion, the party's attitude, and the voters' position. In the previous chapter, this issue was discussed in relation to the candidates of political parties, and the results clearly show that when making decisions, deputies follow their own opinion. The party's influence over voting was not confirmed in Slovakia, because based on the percentage of possible answers, councillors consider the voters' view first and only then the opinion of the party; moreover, the percentage of responses in the latter case is only slightly more than 6 %. Assessment of the loyalty the Slovak councillors feel toward their own opinion, the opinion of the party and of the electorate when they vote, we find similarity with Czech councillors, who likewise do not perceive their mandate as imperative, whether from the electorate or the party. Once the party affiliation is, nevertheless, taken into account, differences do emerge. The difference between voting in line with the voters' opinion and the party's opinion in the case of politically-affiliated candidates is not as pronounced in the Czech Republic as it is in Slovakia. We can thus argue that the Slovak candidates of political parties have a greater tendency to view their representative role as civic service because their vote respects the citizens' opinion much more than the party's recommendation.

Conclusion

Our survey does not confirm the hypothesis that independent councillors would be junior in their office, as the average length of time councillors serve in office is similar for both the groups. This interpretation is supported also by the percentage of electoral period in which the two types of councillors are. This is also illustrative of whether candidates manage to retain their office. The ratio of municipal councillors who have managed to become re-elected in all the elections held so far, is balanced, ranging with minimum deviations between 5.3 % and 5.6 %. Both the groups thus register an approximately equal number of deputies who have been elected in all the elections held so far.

The importance of councillor duties illustrates the general attitude of independent candidates and politically-affiliated candidates to their role in municipal councils. Aside from the obvious exception of enforcing the programme of a political party, almost no differences can be found in the importance attributed to individual administration duties. According to deputies, the most important task is to define the main goals of the municipality, followed by the control of municipal activities, and informing the local community about problematic issues. Although the order in which the independent and the party-affiliated candidates put other duties is slightly different, there are only limited differences in the attributed importance.

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