

# Direct elections of mayors in the Czech Republic? Data from research and political support\*

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**Abstract:** *This article deals with the debate over the introduction of direct elections for mayors in the Czech Republic. This reform measure has for the most part been mentioned by the political parties themselves and they consider it to be a tool to revive participation. Also the municipal politicians support this. In 1997, a questionnaire of mayors was distributed in the framework of research for **Local Democracy and Innovation II: Mapping Institutional Performance** (1996–1999), in the years 2008 and 2009, the project **Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance** (MAELG) was carried out, which focused on members of the representative bodies of European cities, in which there were more than 10 thousand inhabitants. In the Czech Republic, we performed an additional research study of municipalities in areas of between 3 to 10 thousand inhabitants. From both research works there emerges unequivocal support for the introduction of direct elections of mayors. Questions remain as to what the electoral law would be, how much authority the mayors would have, and therefore what would the local political system look like.*

**Keywords:** *Local Government, Czech Republic, Direct Elections, Mayors*

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Twenty years after the creation of the democratic territorial municipalities in the Czech Republic there is talk about the necessity of its reform. Twenty years ago the municipalities gained their independence, and this level of representative democracy has received the highest degree of trust of all the political institutions in the Czech Republic. Even though the initial conditions in the area of municipalities were the same in both parts of the Czechoslovak Federation, the current municipal situation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are very different. In Slovakia, people elect their mayors and Lord Mayors directly, whereas in the Czech Republic these municipal functionaries are elected indirectly. It is the Slovak example which is considered by many as a suitable model of reform of municipal politics, even if there are many more urgent concerns such as the modification of the budgetary determination for taxes or ensuring greater effectiveness of the municipalities. However in various proposals, political programmes, and the media, the number one measure of reform is unequivocally dominated by the direct election of mayors.

In June 2010 the government was established and consisted of the *Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democratic Party, ODS), TOP 09 and *Věci veřejné* (Public Affairs, VV). This was a centre-right cabinet, which the parties considered to be a government of budgetary responsibility. The voters of these parties supported among other things greater measures of savings from the state, reforms and fighting against corruption. The government committed itself in its programme to a number of things, but from the standpoint of this paper it is important that they would like to “compile an analysis with the aim of creating conditions for possible direct elections of mayors in small municipalities, and where the case may be in other types of territorial municipal units.” Therefore there is formed the basis for at least the direct election of mayors in municipalities where there is a maximum of 1,500 inhabitants, and of course the proposal can further extend to all size categories of municipalities and also to the region.

This is of course not the first attempt at the introduction of the direct election of mayors in the Czech Republic. Proposals of this nature have appeared several times, most recently in the period during the last Parliamentary session (2006–2010). During this election period there were three cabinets, the minority government of Mirek Topolánek (ODS, 2006–2007), the majority government of Mirek Topolánek (ODS, Christian Democrats and Greens, 2007–2009) with the support of two opposition Members of Parliament from the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the caretaker government which emerged after the expression of no-confidence in Topolánek’s government. The Cabinet was led by the former director of the Czech Statistical Office, Jan Fischer (2009–2010). During the second Topolánek government, the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic prepared material entitled, “An analysis of the possibilities of the introduction of direct elections of mayors,” which was under no circumstances a quality methodological handbook for introduc-

ing these reforms of municipal politics (Jüptner 2009). It contained far too many mistakes, and comparisons, that is, analysis of suitable examples for the Czech model was “limited practically only to Slovakia and Bavaria” (ibid 75). There were other inadequacies and the inspiration of neighbouring Slovakia was quite evident. The analysis probably damaged the prospects of the introduction of direct election of mayors as it never presented the real possibilities for change. After all, there are a number of municipal systems to examine just in Europe alone.

## Local systems of government

Comparison and research allows for a variety of types and systems of local governments, respectively the form of the municipalities. Specifically in the Czech environment, several texts are available on this theme. The main debates and contributions were summarized by Zuzana Ringlerová (Ringlerová 2009). The aim of her text was to show in which manner the selection of the criteria for the formulation of typology is influenced and present the most commonly used typologies, while placing stress on the analysis of the conclusions of the now classical text of Page and Goldsmith (1987). As an appendix to the magazine “Veřejná správa” (Public Administration) there was issued a translation of Jaume Magre and Xavier Bertrana, which discussed the forms of municipalities and the leading members (secretaries) in 17 European countries. Focus was placed on the administration of the selected European municipalities, that is, on the positions, role and authority of the “manager of the local municipalities.” Both of these texts, among other things mentions one of the most used typologies of Poul Erik Mouritzen and James H. Svava (2002), and the analysis of Magre and Bertrana is based on this. Mouritzen and Svava differentiate four models of local municipalities: 1. model of the dominant mayor, 2. model of the leader of the committee, 3. model of collective leadership, and 4. representative-manager model (Mouritzen and Svava 2002).

On the other hand, Hesse and Sharpe (1991) differentiate three systems of local governments and this according to the relationship of the local municipalities to the higher levels of administration. These systems are French, English and Northern and Central-European. There emerge three groups which are concentrated countries who are very similar in this regard. The first, “the French group” is formed by states that have a higher level of centralization and local politics have in comparison with the other two types a much lower level of authority (France, Spain, Italy and Portugal). In the second, “the English group,” where in addition to Great Britain there is also Ireland, greater stress is placed on citizen services, especially in comparison to the previous model. In the third, the Northern and Central-European group, we can find for example Switzerland, Germany or the Scandinavian countries. For this group of

countries there is a greater level of decentralization and even financial and social autonomy. Heinelt and Hlepas (2006) later add a fourth model which is formed by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the former Communist states, where the centralized system was replaced by systems of local municipalities with “a local democratic state apparatus.”

From the standpoint of leadership the local organization is addressed by Steyvers et al, and they divide this into two ideal models. In the first the leadership is relatively strong and is dominated executively and administratively, in the second it is weak, because it is either *non-local* (Central and Eastern Europe), primarily due to its etatism, or *non-political*, in the sense that the city management is the executive, while the role of politicians is ceremonial (Steyvers et al 2008: 134). For Northern Europe the leadership is collective, the leaders are conceptualized as *primus inter pares* (first among equals). This division of countries into two groups is used in the aforementioned Page and Goldsmith (1987: 156–163), where they are divided according to three basic criteria: functional responsibility, independence and decision-making and access.

Not all however agree with similar typology. Harold Wolman gives it credit as a “theoretically and empirically interesting work” (2008: 87), nevertheless it lacks in coherence and the ability to generalize. Wolman admits that a comparative approach is necessary, nevertheless the current criteria of classification is inadequate, in many places too evident and in a majority of cases focuses only on certain characteristics of local governments.

From this brief debate however, it unambiguously emerges that in case any Czech government decides to introduce the direct election of mayors, than it would be appropriate to consider the adjustment of the entire local system. If this would include the formulation of another government analysis then it would be suitable to write materials of a higher quality, which would take into account other systems than simply those that can be seen in Bavaria and in Slovakia.

## Direct elections of mayors from the perspective of representatives and mayors

As I have previously stated, the most often mentioned changes to the Czech municipal system is the direct election of mayors. After 1990, several international research projects were carried out in a number of European countries. Two are important for us. In the second round of the project *Local Democracy and Innovation II: Mapping Institutional Performance* (1996–1999), of which the first took place in 1991, the mayors were questioned among other things about direct elections. In the

years 2008 and 2009, I participated with my colleague Dan Ryšavý on the project *Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance* (MAELG), which focused on members of the municipal bodies of the European cities in which there were more than 10 thousand inhabitants. We also carried out one more research project in the Czech Republic in municipalities in which there lived between 3 and 10 thousand inhabitants. We will now look at the first survey of LDI II, which shows us the level of support of the mayors for undertaking reform steps (Table 1).

**Table 1: Opinions of mayors on the suitability of direct elections of mayors/Lord Mayors according to the size of the municipality**

%	Number of inhabitants of the municipality/city				
	0–2	2–10	10–20	20–50	> 50
Agree	70	58	54	54	60
Neutral	4	8	11	17	20
Disagree	26	35	35	29	20

Source: LDI II.

The opinions of the mayors are expressed on a five-point scale (“completely agree” to “completely disagree”), and the outside positions were combined. We can see that in all the size categories of the municipalities that the mayors agreed with the direct election of mayors, and the lowest support is in municipalities with between 10 and 50 thousand inhabitants, and the highest is in municipalities with less than 2 thousand inhabitants. It was supported by approximately two-thirds of all respondents. The representatives in the years 2008 and 2009 were also asked about how suitable for them were the direct election of mayors. The comparison of answers of the municipal representatives according to size can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Opinions of the representatives on the suitability of direct elections of mayors/Lord Mayors based on the size of the municipalities**

%	Number of inhabitants of the municipality/city				
	3–5	5–10	10–20	20–50	> 50
Suitable	74	69	75	78	65
Neutral	15	18	12	13	19
Unsuitable	11	12	13	9	16

Source: MAELG

The representatives were again questioned on a five-point scale (from “very suitable” to “very unsuitable”). The outside positions were again combined. From Table 2, we can unambiguously see that the support of the representatives in the years 2008 and 2009 for the introduction of the direct elections is higher than among the mayors eleven years ago. It is interesting that the highest support is in the category of 10 to 50 thousand inhabitants. This is where the researchers of the LDI II project recorded the least support. The lowest support, but with two-thirds support for the introduction of direct elections is in the largest cities.

We will now look at one more aspect. In the Czech Republic there exist cities with a greater significance, that is, the statutory cities. These are organized by statutes and can be incorporated into city sections. There are a total of 24, and this includes the capital city of Prague. This privilege is used by approximately at third of them, and there are 47 which have more than 10 thousand inhabitants. In Table 3, we present the opinions of representatives concerning direct elections in cities (above 10 thousand inhabitants) and city sections.

**Table 3: Opinions of representatives about the suitability of direct elections of mayors/Lord Mayors: comparison of cities and city sections**

	Very suitable, suitable		Neither suitable or unsuitable		Very unsuitable	
	Cities	City sections	Cities	City sections	Cities	City sections
Direct election of mayors	71	58	14	20	12	18

Source: MAELG

From Table 3, we can see that the representatives of the city sections support the direct elections the least, with 58 % of them in support. However, this support is still a majority. In comparison with the category of cities this is 13 % less and shows that in the biggest cities the support for this reform measure is the lowest.

## Political support of the direct election of mayors

In the introduction, I stated that the government in 2010 incorporated into their programme declaration an effort to introduce direct elections of mayors, at least in the smaller municipalities. The government coalition at their inception controlled a majority of 118 votes of 200. This is enough to pass laws, but is however not a constitutional majority. There exist two interpretations. The first is that this is not compatible with the constitution and requires its change and the second states that a three-fifth majority is not necessary to pass it. We can overlook this conflict

and state that if there would be the introduction of direct elections of mayors by a change in the constitutional law, then the government would need to gain the support of at least two opposition Members of Parliament. Therefore, we must look at the positions of the successful political parties in the election of 2010 regarding the direct elections. There are five political parties with representatives in the Lower Chamber (these are shown in bold letters, with the government parties underlined in Table 4). There are also included other interesting or influential subject in this table as well. This should show the overall political attitudes towards this reform measure. The Green Party (SZ) (in the government from 2007–2009), Strana Práv Občanů — Zemanovci (the party of the former Prime-Minister and Chairman of ČSSD), Suverenita (a populist grouping of former European Member of Parliament Jana Bobošíková) and the Křesťanská a demokratická unie — Československá strana lidová (KDU-ČSL, a traditional Czech political party, which is for the first time in its history not represented in the Lower Chamber of Parliament).

**Table 4: Opinion of political parties regarding direct election of mayors**

<b>Name of Party</b>	<b>Direct elections in the program</b>	<b>Support of direct elections</b>	<b>Support (%)</b>
<b>ČSSD</b>	NO	–	22,08
<b><u>ODS</u></b>	NO	–	20,22
<b><u>TOP 09</u></b>	YES	YES	16,70
<b>KSČM</b>	NO	–	11,27
<b><u>VV</u></b>	YES	YES	10,88
KDU-ČSL	NO	–	4,39
SPOZ	YES	YES	4,33
Suverenita	YES	YES	3,67
SZ	NO	–	2,44

Source: Election programmes (2010)

From Table 4 we can see the influence of TOP 09 and VV in the programme declaration. ODS did not mention direct elections in their program. The opposition ČSSD and KSČM also did not mention this as well, but it can be assumed that their Members of Parliament support it. Among the parties outside of Parliament, SPOZ and Suverenita are for direct election of mayors and the remaining two parties did not mention it. The parties as a majority do not state why the indirect elections should be ended and the direct elections introduced. The only reason that emerges out of the election programme is a greater responsibility for the mayors and increased participation.

If we look at the election programs in greater detail, then we see that a majority of the promises for direct election of mayors was accompanied by the desire for direct election of the president. The political parties, of course, do not mention what authority the mayors would have, whether this would increase or decrease their current authority, and whether the function of the mayors would be compatible with the function of the representatives, etc. The programme declaration of the government is similarly vague.

## Conclusion

From comparative international research we can see how the mayors in 1997, as well as the representatives in 2008 and 2009 support the introduction of direct elections of mayors in the Czech Republic. As there is the political support for this, we can assume that the direct elections will be introduced. The only, yet very important variables that could prevent this from happening would be the question of the level of authority of the mayors, the method of elections or the possible incompatibility between the function of the mayors and the representatives. It will also be important the level of support the government gains among interest groups in which the municipalities cooperate with and coordinate their activities.

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