

Daniel Čermák, Jana Vobecká et al.:
*Spolupráce, partnerství a participace v místní
veřejné správě: význam, praxe, příslib*
(*Cooperation, Partnership and Participation in Public
Administration: Meaning, Practice and Promise*).

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Local governance, local administration of public affairs, cooperation of diverse actors at the local level and direct civic participation in community governance — these are just some of the themes that (re-)emerged within the public and specialist discourses in the years following the regime change in 1989. The last 20 years have witnessed a significant shift in the understanding of the function and purpose of local administration and the involvement of other actors; a shift that has manifested itself in the day-to-day exercise of local governance, which, however, still has some way to go in terms of fulfilling its functions.

That is one of the reasons why the 2011 monograph *Spolupráce, partnerství a participace v místní veřejné správě: význam, praxe, příslib* (Cooperation, Partnership and Participation in Public Administra-

tion: Meaning, Practice and Promise) was written by a group of authors based at the department of Local and Regional Studies of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, attempted a *reflection of the successes and challenges of the new forms of interactive governance at the local level in the Czech Republic* (p. 162). The book is divided into ten chapters which make up the two sections. The first three chapters are predominantly theoretical, providing a relatively informative introduction to local governance, and are supplemented in the following parts by more detailed empirical studies by the individual authors. The publication is primarily aimed at an expert audience that has at least some prior knowledge of the topic in question.

In the first chapter, Michal Illner defines the terms ‘cooperation,’ ‘partner-

ship' and 'participation at the local level' and explains how these concepts are formalised and implemented in Czech law. The chapter gives a concise and clear overview of the existing legislative framework (which is deemed comprehensive by Illner) in relation to interactive processes at the community level. The overview succeeds in orienting the reader to the specific actions available. The definition and understanding of the term 'participation' is, however, inconsistent with the usage of the same term in all of the following chapters where 'participation' is understood in a broader sense as '*an instrument that equalises the power asymmetry between the citizenry and the public administration apparatus*' (p. 37). This inconsistency proves potentially problematic.

In light of the aforementioned definition, Josef Bernard (chapter 2) incorporates the partnership principle into participation. Considering the structure and content of the preceding chapter, this may be confusing to the reader. Bernard also searches for the origins of the current approach to public administration, which he traces back to the Europe of the 1980s and the principle of governance, which took hold in the Czech Republic after 1989. He rightly points out certain negative aspects of this approach with respect to the liberal democracy model. Nevertheless, he regards these aspects as challenges rather than insurmountable obstacles. In the next chapter, Zdenka Vajdová returns to the understanding of participation as an effort to achieve a balance of power between the state and

municipalities and between a municipality and citizens. Although, according to Vajdová, there is a prevailing tendency to extend the participatory aspect of the civic culture, the present balance of power is not final and is subject to change in the future. The author also briefly characterises some obstacles to participation and partnership, which are subjected to a more thorough analysis in the studies found in the practical part of the book.

In the first of these empirical studies, Tomáš Kostelecký uses contextual factors in an attempt to identify the structural determinants of voter turnout in parliamentary and local elections (these being some of the most elementary and crucial forms of participation). In local elections, the size of the community is found to be the most important factor influencing turnout. Apart from this finding, Kostelecký does not contribute any new valuable information and the chapter seems somewhat superfluous.

The following chapters by Věra Patočková and Daniel Čermák are more relevant to the topic of the book. Based on a longitudinal study of three mid-sized municipalities, the chapters discuss topics such as civic awareness, interest in participating in community affairs, and the use of the Internet in civic participation processes. Although the texts may be criticised for their sweeping generalisation because the conclusions are only based on data from three municipalities (which can hardly account for any possible regional variations, not to mention national), the authors at least supplement their data (exceptionally in chap-

ters 6 and 7) with the national statistics published by the Czech Statistical Office and the Public Opinion Research Centre, and thus ultimately manage to paint a somewhat more comprehensive picture of the situation at hand.

In the eighth chapter, Jana Stachová and Zdenka Vajdová give us an insight into the questions of motivation and the potential for, and obstacles to participation. The authors draw on their interviews with the institutional actors involved in the participation and partnership processes. The final chapters, which deal with community planning and PPP, have a rather limited information value as they are either predominantly descriptive (chapter 9) or fail to give a satisfactory generalisation (chapter 10).

All in all, the publication fulfils its aims only partially. The main problem is its almost exclusive focus on the concept of civic participation in local governance. This topic is covered in almost all of the chapters. Considering the great number of long-established micro regions and local action groups, the book could have done with an evaluation of the cooperation processes, and to a greater extent of the partnership processes, their functioning so far, and their advantages and shortcomings. This topic was covered only superficially (touched upon in chapter 8) or not at all. The title of the book may give a completely different impression to the reader, causing confusion and disappointment at the end. The reflection of the successes and challenges of the new forms of governance at the community level is therefore

only partial and incomplete. The question remains as to the appropriateness of the concept of the participation selected, since partnership was somewhat confusingly subsumed in participation.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the authors succeeded in identifying some elementary behavioural patterns, motives and obstacles to full participation in local governance among various actors, particularly citizens. The chapters were consistent in their emphasis on the need to identify the preconditions for civic participation, particularly through '*the provision of adequate access to relevant information*' (pp. 84) and creating a network of relationships based on *mutual trust* (pp. 137) to support public interest and participation. The authors state that the approach of the local administration is crucial. Although the local administration — unlike the national government — considers NGOs and the civil society as its partners (pp. 136), if we look at the distribution of power, the scale is still tipped in favour of the public administration, which does not treat its partners *as equals* (pp. 140) and often takes a *directive approach* (pp. 162), choosing to disregard the connections and networks established in earlier projects. Importantly, the authors do not forget to mention the risks and shortcomings of participation and avoid portraying civic engagement as something essentially positive, instead pointing out the dangers of *token participation* and *extreme activism* (pp. 54–56). In this respect, incomplete though it is, the book comes up with recommendations

that can be used by all actors involved in local governance, as advice or warning against common pitfalls in the practice of participation and partnership, and can thus help to achieve a more efficient and inclusive form of public administra-

tion. For these reasons, the shortcomings notwithstanding, the book is a worthy contribution to the emerging body of Czech scholarly literature dealing with local governance.