

# Directly elected large cities' mayors during transition: advantages, risks, leadership style and governance in Slovakia <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Slovakia has witnessed important features of directly elected mayors since over two decades. This paper deals with advantages and risks of the activities and leadership style of directly elected mayors in quickly changing post-socialist condition in Slovakia. In order to understand these two contradictory aspects of directly elected mayors, we selected mayors of two largest cities—Bratislava and Košice having remarkable experiences. We articulate that both mayors provided leadership by progress in urban development and modernization, substantially shaped local governance structures, but they failed in realizing their role, resulting into considerable threat to local finance. Among the specific factors influencing style of their leadership and changing approaches to urban development, less developed institutional environment, lack of financial resources, and higher level political aspirations and inspiration in urban policy are important ones.

## Introduction

Preference has been given to directly elected mayors in the local self-government system of many European countries including Slovakia over the last two decades. As one of the last countries, directly elected mayors are often mentioned as possibly change in the Czech local government system (Šaradín 2010). Such a long period of their function offers an opportunity for detailed evaluation within currently debated framework of leadership, governance and neoliberalism.

Various issues related to attitudes and activities of directly elected mayors can be raised (Bäck et al 2006). Among the key expectations, they will provide clearly identifiable, stronger and progressive leadership to the local community. Being directly elected, they would be a clear representative of the local community, with greater legitimacy and direct accountability to citizens. The direct election of mayors should also increase electoral participation as a form of citizens' mobilisation (Borraz and John 2004; Wollman 2004). Rising attention to economic development, entrepreneurial approaches, public-private partnership and governance requires a new type of local leaders (Leitner 1990). There is more respect given to personalities, charismatic leaders and their capabilities (Lever 2001). On the other hand, there are also potential disadvantages such as lack of support, or conflicts with the city council, risk

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of concentration of power and its eventual misuse, threat of corruption and patronage. There is also a danger for a city which rises and falls with the capacity of its mayor (Svara 2006).

Although the role of mayors in urban development is mentioned by Lever (2001), Ponzini and Rossi (2010), or they face various challenges and dilemmas as outlined by Verheul and Schaap (2010), less attention is paid to their role and strategies adapted to urban development during the transition. Their attitudes may be as heroic or distributive or other leaderships styles (Swianiewicz and Klimska 2003; Getimis and Hlepas 2006). Large scale development and regeneration projects may be the most challenging issue in each city. They also are linked to formation of new partnership, networks of actors; new urban governance practices and provides opportunity for more entrepreneurial attitudes in urban development. So, it is important to study the advantages and the risks of directly elected mayors' activities in rapidly changing post-socialist conditions, including their responses to changing urban governance and need for their cities' modernization and development.

In these contexts, we try to search for answer to questions: What kinds of governance we could find in large post-socialist cities? What was the role of mayors as key actors? How governance partnerships or networks functioned? Inspired by Guarneros-Meza and Geddes (2010), we can consider to which extent neoliberalism penetrated into urban governance in observed cities. We suppose that directly elected mayors would substantially shape local governance model being developed in their cities. The impact of regulatory framework like the role of state and regulatory regime, private actors and political parties in local governance also needs exploration. It can add new knowledge to better understanding of intermingling processes of urban development and governance in transitional societies, taking into account active role of mayors. Our results can provide important contribution to understanding how urban development process can be initiated and organised and what can be its outcome under limited possibilities of post-socialist transition. Nevertheless, knowledge concerning the role of directly elected local leaders can be useful for all societies facing transitional periods in general.

## **Data and Methods**

We selected two largest cities such as Bratislava and Košice of Slovakia, having exceptional positions in the Slovak urban system. Both have their own individual legislation specifying their government system (*viz* Act 377/1990 of Bratislava and Act 401/1990 of Košice). Mayors of both cities were considered as the most remarkable mayors in Slovakia. They emerged as strong leaders with impressive results compared to both their predecessors and successors. The time shift of the decade when they held their offices also offers a challenging research point. Information acquired for identifying and interpretation of the mayors' activities, a wide variety of sources including national legislation, local by-laws, other local self-government documents and articles and interviews in mass media was used.

### ***Elected mayors and local self-government system in Slovakia***

In Slovakia, the main decision concerning the local self-government system during the post-socialist transition was undertaken in 1990. The local level was considered as one of the key arenas of democratic development in society and the directly elected mayor one of its

symbols. Their presence in this post should confirm and guarantee continuity of fundamental societal changes. They would represent a better alternative as compared to the dominance of councils and short-term-existing political parties in local policy-making. The switch to directly elected mayors also expressed the need for efficient leadership as well as to solve successfully the emerging issues within a new framework. They also needed to be able to use different approaches compared to their communist predecessors.

The mayors are elected directly for a four year term by a simple single-round majority vote. The position of directly elected mayors is quite well developed and generally accepted in present-day Slovakia. Nevertheless, numerous changes including the legislation were required to find a suitable framework such as functions of local/city councils, rules for salaries of the mayors and so on. Despite these, there was often raising question about the political parties' development and competition in the fragmented small local self-government system, as there were about 2900 local self-government units in Slovakia.

### ***Transforming structure of the two cities***

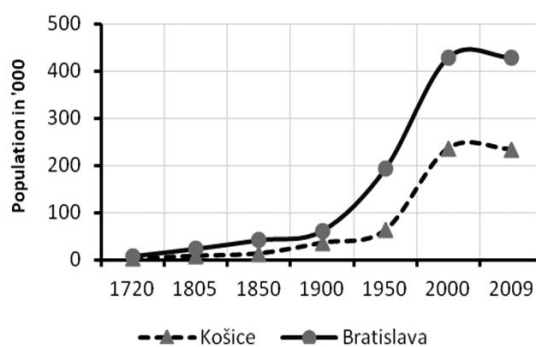
Large cities' government in many cases has generated strong mayors labelled as "great leaders". They are known not only to the local public, but they are subject to much wider attention. Such mayors might have significantly influenced history and development of their cities. They also provide useful lessons in understanding the role of mayor within society (Genieys et al 2004; Svara 2006).

The two mayors —Andrej Ďurkovský of Bratislava and Rudolf Schuster of Košice— are well known among the mayors in Slovakia and present themselves as strong and ambitious leaders. Both graduated in civil engineering and were already experienced politicians and administrators before entered into the position of mayor. Both served elected mayor in their respective cities for two consecutive terms; with the former from 1994-2002 and the latter from 2002 to 2010. The Košice mayor started political career in 1983 when he became mayor of Košice from 1983 to 1986 and then served the government and the political party at different capacities under previous regime (1986-1990), as well as in the changed political system until 2011. In the latter phase, his political career remained to be rising and falling (Schuster 2011). Besides politics, the Košice mayor also got diverse experiences and interests such as work in steel factory VSZ, culture, film, history and travelling and author of many books. He has been popular especially in eastern Slovakia and considered a good communicator and renaissance person as well as established good relations with politicians in German speaking countries. He paid attention to environmental issues, improving poor water distribution throughout the region. The Bratislava mayor entered into politic as a vice-mayor in the central historical city quarter of Bratislava – Staré Mesto (Old City) in 1990, but left his mother political party due to conflicts with citizens associations, environmental activists and within the party in the later phase and served as an independent MP in the parliament in 2010. He has been a well established person in local policy-making and contributed to city centre revitalisation and physical environment development of Bratislava.

The two cities —Bratislava and Košice— are the rapidly growing largest centres in Slovakia; the former with much larger and higher rate than the latter (Figure 1). They are located at the opposite sides of the country. Bratislava is based in the west at a border location with Austria

and Hungary, while Košice in eastern Slovakia also closely borders Hungary and Ukraine. They are the key social and economic centres of the country, with valuable historical heritage. Bratislava is the capital city and Košice is a centre of regional self-government (and also seat of the Constitutional Court). They rapidly grew as industrial centres during the socialist period until 1989. Later they transformed into important centres of services. Both cities function within the framework of the two-tier structure of local self-government, which has been adopted since 1990. The first upper tier is a city-wide self-government and the second lower tier is local self-government in city quarters (17 in Bratislava and 22 in Košice). Both cities compete with one another to some extent. The city of Košice was selected as European City of Culture for 2013.

Figure 1: Population growth in Bratislava and Košice



*Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2010*

### ***The development of the cities' physical structure***

The development of both cities of Košice and Bratislava depended largely on their strong pro-development oriented mayors. Their rule was accompanied by visible investments to improve urban physical environment via larger scale development projects such as city centre revitalisation, river front development, etc. This, in turn, was balanced by large cultural and sport events in both cities. It is true for both, although they were in power in different times and the framework for their activities was different.

In Košice, the mayor had to act in the early transition period. Local self-governments had less power and less resource compared to the later period of decentralisation (2002-2005). This was accompanied by a worse macro-economic situation, poorly developed private sector, and still absent suitably-functioning non-governmental sector in Slovakia. On the other hand, the mayor of Bratislava enjoyed a different situation. He benefitted from more powers and resources after public administration reform and decentralisation. Especially during his second electoral period of late 2008, Slovakia as a whole had witnessed good macro-economic situation and growth before the global financial and economic crisis. Also different are the spatial and temporal perspectives of both cities. During the second half of the nineties, while Košice was a peripheral city with an industrial image without investment, Bratislava flourished during the first decade of this century, being at gateway location just 60 km from Vienna, one of the focal points of Central Europe and attracted many investors as well as new population to the city region (Figure 1).

Both cities got to transform their physical structure with planned innovations through respective mayors' experiences of knowledge and politics, local governance systems, inspirations of western cities, participation of local communities and private sector, and exploitation of economy opportunities at local, regional and global levels. Both cities have gone through reconstruction, rehabilitation, and upgrading activities to be tuned with contemporary demand form and style. The most valuable part of the historic main square centre of Košice city and its neighbouring localities has been transformed substantially with initiation of particular elements of total rehabilitation project including a small water stream, singing water fountain, many pieces of urban design successfully by the commitment efforts of the mayor. In addition, the Košice dwellers also got to have a new level of cultural activities with organising large scale street festivals including dance, concert, opera, etc attended by thousands of people, famous opera star, and dancers. Likewise, the city of Bratislava has got a higher level of development projects, including small and big size such as solitaire buildings, global leading real estate fair MIPIM, the Danube riverside developments such as Eurovea and River Park, bridge, reconstruction of the ice-hockey field, mass transport company, old Town Hall reconstruction and improved management of many marketing activities through partnership with private developers, foreign investors and non-governmental sector. Like Košice, Bratislava also held a variety of festive events, introduced a tradition of celebration of Hungarian kings' coronation and hosted two world sports such as ice-hockey and canoe slalom in 2011.

Both mayors have contributed to introduce new urbanity and local events that confirmed an important societal shift after 1989 and thus to the formation of a new post-communist identity (Verheul and Schaap 2010). Individually, while Košice city mayor Schuster seems to have a traditional heroic leadership quality with more decisive and energising roles, Ďurkovec, the mayor of Bratislava city, is characterised by having a leadership quality to leave more influence, activity space and tasks to other actors.

### ***The other side - financial trouble***

One of the most crucial qualities for a good and successful mayor is the ability to sustain a sound financial situation of the city. The city governments should have more power and large resources available for investment. It is essential for the mayors to find opportunities to generating local finance for investment in cities development (Avellaneda 2009). This was not the case of mayors of the two cities. Both mayors were very ambitious of their cities development and their development activities included very expensive projects like large scale rehabilitation of public spaces and construction of new infrastructure and facilities that required huge finance supplied by banks loans in case of Košice and by spending most of its reserve fund and properties and bank loan in case of Bratislava. The situation was worse in Košice as it was close to financial collapse and thus threatened to basic functioning of the city like reduced public services provision – street lights. The situation was critical especially since 1998 when about 48 percent of all budget income was from credit (Feranec 2010). The financial problem of Bratislava was being made less by the city government through reducing investments substantially in new works and spending cuts in the following budget expenditures. Both cases seem to have specific financial crisis of urban development policy (Weber 2010).

Košice city government tried to solve the ever growing financial burden through standard measures such as releasing of large municipal bonds, borrowing state financial loan at lower

rate, prolongation of bank payments, and selling of property like main local stadium. Despite the huge crises of finance and city functions operation, Košice mayor Schuster remained popular among the locals. They perceived the results of his work as positive in principle.

In case of Bratislava city government, risk of local finance was reduced by allowing private-led development and later accompanied by much larger local public money investment. In addition, the city spent its reserve fund to cover financial involvement in the large development activities as stated above. Furthermore, there was excessive pressure on reducing large city government spending and financial crisis (Komová 2010). This situation also affected substantially to limit the development activities of the successive elected mayor in the following years. The Bratislava mayor Ďurkovský, linked to booming development in Bratislava, also became a nationally known person, with a good position within the political party.

It has to be mentioned that there was almost no strict legislation to limit municipal borrowing in Slovakia during the nineties. This had caused problems for Košice and some other Slovak cities that induced the adoption of new legislation to limit municipal borrowing (Kling and Nižňanský 2004). These rules and procedures thus have provided a framework to settle the financial troubles of local self-governments under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance. This legislation was already in practice during Ďurkovský mayor's terms.

### ***Leadership and municipal governance during post-socialist transition***

Besides having basic institutionally-based characteristic mayors, we attempt to interpret the style of urban governance model of the two cities. Both mayors can be considered leaders according to Stone (1995), as they focused on their goals, mobilized needed support and resources, organized their followers, or offered a certain level of creativity and vision. Nevertheless, they could not fit into ideal leadership styles. For instance, according to Peter John typology (Swianiewicz and Klimska 2003; Cheyne 2004) there are four leadership styles—caretaker, consensual facilitator, city boss and visionary. Another attempt for a systematic evaluation of leadership styles can be found in Getimis and Hlepas (2006). They present strategic (change oriented) or reproductive (status-quo oriented) mayors using such criteria as time horizon, or scope of the leader (leadership orientation). According to attitudes to exercise the power they recognise authoritarian and co-operative leaders. Also in their case, it resulted in four leadership styles – visionary, consensus facilitator, city boss and protector. Greasley and Stoker (2008) advocate facilitative leadership style based on partnership skills, accessibility, low partisanship, and decision making capacity. It has already been described above the approaches and values according to which the mayors have been identified as “heroic” or “adaptive” or distributive mayors. Their work had been substantially influenced by key concepts known in contemporary urban politics – globalisation, governance and neoliberalism, as well as by important set of contextual factors as location, progress in transition, as well as local social, economic and political environment.

They both represent specific approaches and therefore do not fit into one type of leadership style. Their reputation had been based on long term involvement in local politics and urban development. They acted in different periods but their aspirations were similar in many fields. However, there were also differences. There were signs of visionary, own-idea implementation, consensus building, but as well being a city boss in the case of Mayor Schuster. Mayor

Ďurkovský seemed to be a facilitator, city boss and reactive who attempted to efficiently use the available opportunities. In both cases, we can find the importance of the role of personal political values and aspirations, as well as relations to political parties. While Mayor Schuster was a left wing oriented pragmatic leader and a non-partisan mayor who mobilised external public support on his own strength against the City Council, Mayor Ďurkovský followed right wing background, with more pro-business oriented and public-private co-operation and being a nominee of political parties that dominated the City Council and provided him with a more comfortable position in search for support of his policy. Both situations showed risks to them in search of support to all decisions (Schuster) and less critical work of the council (Ďurkovský). Nevertheless, Schuster had been less dependent on party based political pressure as compared to Ďurkovský. Both mayors were influenced by their higher level political aspirations.

Both mayors were inspired and influenced by general trend in urban policy and development. We can find fragments of globalisation, governance and neo-liberalism. As far as Košice is concerned, it seems that it was globalisation that mattered. The approach of Mayor Schuster could be interpreted according to Clarke and Gaile (1997) that consider attention to the politics of ideas as crucial and tried to overcome Kosice's peripheralism and to mediate local and global approaches. He attempted to bring global trends to the city. It can be considered as an earlier attempt of active "urban milieu" globalisation in that part of Slovakia. In fact he decided to progress in the uneasy task of globalisation during early post-socialist transition in a peripheral location. He wanted to present Košice to the wider world (e.g. reconstructing city centre), but at the same time he wanted to provide "globalism" for local citizens (organising large events, festivals). They should feel like full members of the global community and not as citizens living in a "forgotten" city at the periphery.

The approaches adopted by both mayors confirm the shift towards governance in local politics. Motivated by high political aspirations, they searched for partners outside the local political arena due to lack of resources. Partnerships and networks they formed focused on selected large actors, leaving aside less influential other potential partners, with reduced chance for active participation. We can take into account the situation in earlier stage of the transition with less developed private sector and non-governmental sector, or less experience with public participation. Bratislava, though got opportunity to more sophisticated model of governance, including international actors, had in practice unclear relations to those partners, lacking of transparency and conflicts with some local actors (Buček 2006; Šuška 2008). Mayor Ďurkovský's approach was also closer to neo-liberalism, which could be considered as the dominant frame of urban politics after 2000 (McGuirk 2011). His right wing political background and City Council led to urban development vision with a strong role for less regulated private sector actors. It had expressed visible move in favour of large private development projects. Such development depending on the private sector modified development priorities and particular spaces, as well as institutions. Later, local self-government in Bratislava entered into big public-private partnership projects inspired by many cities worldwide.

## **Conclusions**

Within urban governance studies there is a need to pay attention to the specific situation of directly elected mayors' activities during the transitional situation in society like in Slovakia. It

can be very helpful knowledge for various transitional societies and democratizing countries that consider the introduction of directly elected mayors. We have to be aware that there can emerge certain contradictions between expectations and goals on the one hand and powers, regulatory framework, available resources and general conditions within the society, on the other hand. The directly elected mayor (with all his ambitions, experiences, vision) may face obstacles and serious limits caused by less elaborated legislation, lack of powers, financial scarcity, less efficient staff, pressure for quick improvements in various fields of local life etc. It should be mentioned that unclear, unstable and complicated relations to central state and local state administration also can circumscribe their performance.

The directly elected mayors with a leadership attitude perceive their success in office in wider terms (exceeding standard functioning of local public services provision). These active mayors (and their cities also) concentrate on remarkable goals which may be achieved during transitional times only with risky behaviour. They can use a less elaborated legal and procedural framework, as well as lack of transparency, e.g. to excessive borrowing. It seems that directly elected mayors need a certain regulatory framework even during a transition period, and not only in local finance. The democratic procedures in these aspects need more precise legal expression.

A very sensitive issue is the relation between mayors and the City Council. Under standard conditions, mayors are limited in their activity by council decisions. They are altogether responsible for successes and for failures in local policy-making. All important decisions pass through City Councils. Experience shows that two directly elected institutions at the local level can generate tensions and occasionally can paralyse the adoption of efficient solutions. A well-developed system of checks and balances, improved planning and strategic management can be helpful. A specific issue is the strengthening of legal responsibility of leading politicians for their own decisions.

Among more general issues that need discussing, we have to mention the duration of the mayoral term in office during the transition. We can raise the question of whether four years are long enough for an electoral period. The existing short term period motivates ambitious mayors to quickly accomplish financially-demanding development. A longer period could allow them to be successful without pressure for such quickly managed development, or they would be responsible for the consequences of their developmental approach (not to leave debt and paralyse the activity of next mayor). The current period of four years is most likely a reflection of the transition period beginning, full of doubts, uncertainty and unwillingness to provide a longer period for "first" mayors. Shorter terms were also certain prevention against the developing of longer term corruption relations that can be more easily challenged by more frequent elections. It can be argued that after a certain period, a prolongation of the period can be considered for instance for five years, if more stable framework and well developed functioning of local self-government structures is achieved.

We should take into account the political nature of the directly elected large-city mayors. It seems that these mayors are driven by much higher political ambitions. There are many cases of mayors of large cities successfully competing for seats in Slovak Parliament. Although we can observe also reverse cases – members of Parliament or central government ministers successfully competed for a mayoral post. The current mayor of Košice is a former Minister



of Health. The current mayor of Bratislava is a former MP, former Ministry of Education and former mayor of Bratislava's largest city quarter (Petržalka). The successful mayor sees cities as a tool allowing them to progress to higher levels of politics, or to "stay in contact". It generates their enormous interest in success. Their activity and mobilisation can be viewed as a mixture of "service" to citizens and own higher ambitions. Their success and approaches also should persuade party leaders in their abilities and attraction for the electorate in nationwide elections. It is influenced by the parliamentary election system in Slovakia having the whole country as a single electoral district. They can bring voters in their cities and surrounding region to the total party electorate.

We may conclude that preference given to directly elected mayors has not been a bad solution in Slovakia. They have brought a lot of personal energy to managing cities and their development. As can be seen by the occasional visitor, or short term observer, they contributed to modernization and the new image of their cities. In principle, they did what had been generally expected. They speeded up transformation processes and enjoyed quite a high reputation. Nevertheless, we can observe also personal failures in some cases (not only in Bratislava and Košice). Local citizens also have been confronted with the less than positive consequences of their leadership style. It seems that urban leadership orientation needs to be balanced by more complex responsibility and accountability. Directly elected mayors also need more developed local institutions and partners; crucial are those which are important for good local democracy, such as free media and a well-developed civil society.

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