

CURRENT STRATEGIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN CITIES AND ITS APPLICATION IN SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the current situation in urban strategic economic development planning in Slovakia. It is based on the planning approach and compares the strategies worked out in Slovak cities to experiences of cities outside Slovakia. After years of arbitrary, rare and more or less careful preparation of development strategies during the 1990s in Slovakia, the situation has changed, especially after new legislation concerning development planning was adopted in 2001. It initiated massive preparation of strategic plans of cities. Over the last years, Slovak cities have started to approach the standard level of strategic planning activities as known from international experiences. Their development strategies were prepared following common structures and processes. The generally smaller size of Slovak cities made for, e.g., a shorter time of preparation, not so ambitious goals, or less complicated structures during strategies' preparation. What is important is that within strategic planning procedures cities built links and joint bodies across local economies and communities. Thanks to their strategic planning, cities know much more about their economies and residents. It also seems to have become a permanent and important part of local management and the planning culture.

KEY WORDS: strategic planning, economic development, strategies, cities.

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Introduction

Strategic planning of economic development is quite a usual field of activity in cities around the world. Slovak cities started to be active in this field only in the 1990s. They did so mostly under the pressure of the local economy transformation, being inspired by experienced of Western cities, as well as in an attempt to improve access to development funds or to attract investors. After years of arbitrary, rare and more or less careful preparation of development strategies during the 1990s, the situation has changed, especially after new legislation concerning devel-

opment planning was adopted in 2001. It initiated massive preparation of strategic plans of cities. As mentioned by Buček (2005b), traditional physical planning is now balanced by the preparation of plans/programmes (strategies) of economic development. However, more detailed analyses of strategic economic development planning in Slovakia are absent. There are only mentions in studies focusing on urban development, planning in a wider sense (Slavík, 2000; Slavík et al., 2005), local economic development (Buček, 2005a), or urban policy (Buček, 2005b). A specific and narrowly oriented study was prepared by Kling (2006), focusing on the evaluation

procedure within local development strategies already adopted in Slovak cities.

Strategic approaches to economic development in cities are the subject of longer-term serious research. A basic framework of strategic economic development planning in general was presented for example in Borja and Castells (1996), Parysek (2001), or Blakely and Bradshaw (2002). Many authors focused on experiences of selected cities (Alden, de Rosa Pires, 1996; Williams, 1999). Other authors studied particular techniques and the sectoral orientation of strategies (Bayliss, 2004). The role of development strategies within current urban management was emphasised by, e.g., Healey et al. (1995). We can address city development strategies by identifying actions of local actors (a behavioural approach) which are not explicitly presented in coherent documents and which result from strategic thinking. In those terms Savitch and Kantor (2003) studied development strategies in the comparative dimension of 10 cities across Western Europe and North America. However, we can also study explicit development documents – strategic development plans and all related procedures (a planning approach).

The main aim of this study is to analyse the current situation in strategic urban economic development planning in Slovakia in the current international context. Since there are many disputes on 'strategic planning' (e.g. Friedman et al., 2004), let me emphasise certain features relevant for this study. It is based on the planning approach, which assumes that there exist specific (strategic) planning documents in cities. They are the result of specific planning procedures focusing on local economic development in a mid-range and longer-term perspective. They are strategic also due to their attempt to lead to considerable social and economic change. It is usually achieved by the concentration on a narrow group of development priorities, having more implementation 'drive', focusing more on financial and administrative measures, monitoring of progress and efficiency, and linking together various local actors. In the following text I mostly use the term 'development strategies' (or simply strategies) as a more general term covering various terminological nuances used in this field around the world and in Slovakia. At the beginning, I attempt to summarise basic trends in

strategic urban development planning in general by analysing a selected set of strategies devised mostly by European cities. Besides context issues like reasons, time aspects, I concentrated my research interests on basic characteristics of their planning approaches, structure of documents, monitoring, working and managing structures, phasing of work, etc. Then I turn attention to urban strategic planning in Slovakia. I attempt to follow similar characteristics, supplemented by presenting specific national features, like its development and the legal environment.

Two main sets of resources were used for the main analyses. The first set covered strategic planning documents of non-Slovak cities (an international sample). The scope of this sample is quite wide, covering cities in various countries. For research purposes it was divided into two groups. The first embraced a 'core' group of cities whose strategies were used for a more detailed analysis of approaches – Brno (the Czech Republic), Dublin (Ireland), Glasgow, Manchester (Great Britain), Krakow, Poznan (Poland), Ottawa (Canada), Riga (Latvia), and Vilnius (Lithuania); and a supplementary group which served to support aspects not covered sufficiently by the core group. It included Barcelona, Bilbao, Florence, Torino, Vienna, Helsinki, Lisbon, and Warsaw. In most cases were used English versions of their development strategies. The other group included Slovak cities with more than 50 thousand inhabitants (Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, Košice, Martin, Nitra, Prešov, Prievidza, Poprad, Trenčín, Trnava, Žilina). I analysed their approaches to strategic planning using their development strategies adopted after the year 2001. I selected the larger foreign cities from the point of view of data availability as well as the quality of their strategic work, which may serve as a good-practice sample for the smaller-sized Slovak cities, only now starting strategic planning application.

Strategic planning and development strategies – international experiences

Strategic planning is a planning framework extensively recommended by numerous institutions. Working out development strategies is directly supported by, e.g., the UN Human Set-

lements Programme HABITAT and the World Bank. Initiatives are also put forward by such bodies as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, the LEED initiative), or the European Union. It is recommended by important associations of cities, like the Cities Alliance (2006).

We also have to mention the attention paid to this planning framework by the European Union. There have been strategic plans of cities that were an important argument for allocating large sums of EU resources to urban development projects. Strategic planning has also been given an important position in the current planning period, 2007–2013. A call for the preparation of strategies, availability of coherent long-term plans, a long term vision, is expressed, for example, in Regulation (EC) No. 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Regional Development Fund, or in the Communication from the Commission to the Council and Parliament on „Cohesion Policy and Cities“ – COM (2006) 385 and SEC (2006) 928. These approaches are mentioned among such guiding principles as sustainable urban development, competitiveness, wide participation, and public-private partnership. Cities with such strategies substantially increase their chances for successful access to EU funds and their efficient use; they respect one of the basic principles of EU fund spending known as programming. Many European states have stated the need for preparation and implementation of economic development plans (under various names).

The first question is, why cities mobilise themselves in preparation of development strategies? The reasons that cities usually give in their strategic documents are diverse (e.g. in the forewords or introductions to their strategies). They reflect a certain perception of the external conditions as well as the internal situation of a city. Among the key reasons mentioned are international interurban competition and attempts to move higher in the European urban hierarchy, or to improve one's position in the international division of labour. Some cities feel pressed to react to the changed international situation in general, especially the EU and NATO expansion. Cities, depending on their

position, express also their development responsibility towards their 'own' state or region. Some of them attempt to accelerate and multiply the already achieved positive development. Part of cities 'fight' against time and circumstances for more traditional reasons – to face and deal with internal problems of a city and its development – as a consequence of local economy restructuring, depopulation trends, migration pressures, various kinds of devastation of the urban environment, etc.

Pressure for strategy preparation is also related to the changing planning framework, requirements set by new legislation and (new) plans and strategies devised by higher-level territorial organisations, not to mention adjustment to the new EU programming period. An attempt to achieve more participatory development also intervenes into the planning framework. Some cities consider strategic planning as a way to attract more actors (especially from outside the public sector) to share the common vision and participate in strategy implementation. Cities also tend to identify a more narrow group of principal development aims in order to better exploit their potential and concentrate capacities and resources (own and external). They try to define new goals from quite a large scope of everyday activities of city governments. It should lead to higher efficiency in managing local affairs as well. These development strategies should also give a new quality to development and the life of citizens by proposing goals aiming at a higher quality of life, sustainable development, creativity and innovation, as well as well-being and wealth for citizens.

The time needed for preparation and the time span covered by a development strategy are among fundamental issues. The time span varies, but it has usually been 10–15 years. Although it is not easy to define precisely, strategy preparation is usually a time-consuming effort. This characteristic is blurred by decisions made in City Councils (the official start of work, final approval). The average time needed for the preparation of a standard development strategy is 1.5 to 2 years. There have been plans completed within a three-year period and longer (Helsinki, Florence, Warsaw), and none that has been completed in under one year. I consider it

reasonable to emphasise a certain aspect that can prolong or shorten the time of its preparation. Strong and stable political support can speed up the work, while an absence of such interest can paralyse all work. The existence of organisational capacities dealing with strategic planning and its support in local government, or in affiliated institutions, can provide important and efficient grounds for all activities. Previous experiences with such type of planning in the city also matter. They can accelerate work, otherwise more time is spent on 'learning by doing' or transfer of the know-how from consultants to actors. The requirement of external evaluation/reviewing prolongs preparation as it calls for extra time for the formulation of own conclusions (e.g. the Strategic Environmental Assessment, external reviewers). If the development strategy rests on the principles of partnership and wide citizen participation, such participation requires longer periods, while the time is shorter in the case of a more expert-based planning. Also important are already existing good analytical or diagnostic studies available in advance. They can save a few months usually needed to carry them out. The existence of an already accepted (previous) long-term strategy or vision allows a more direct move to the identification and programming of priorities.

The structure of the development strategies drawn up to date follows a certain common pattern. Usually they contain three basic sections. The introductory analytical and diagnostic economic (and social) analyses (often entitled 'City Profile') are followed by the second section - a development programme. In many strategies these two sections have been linked together by a vision of the city. The third section includes chapters addressing implementation issues, especially the financial framework. In many strategies serious attention has been paid to monitoring and evaluation. I also have to mention frequent formal and supplementary parts, like introductions and forewords (at the beginning), as well as chapters presenting planning procedures, participants, and programme supplements in the form of more detailed analyses, links to other documents, references, and information sources, added at the end of the documents.

The first basic section - the socio-economic 'City Profile' - usually consists of two subsections: (1) analytical and (2) interpretative-diagnostic. The scope of this section is highly diversified. Some cities have reduced its size substantially. Their strategies provide only a very brief summary of selected indicators, or short analytical summaries dispersed among particular development priorities and focusing only on certain aspects of the local economy. Their strategies concentrate more on the programming section. Other cities provide very extensive, complex and exhaustive analyses. Among the authors of those analyses an important role is played in some cities by professional staff working in the local administration. In most cases external local consultants are invited to participate in analytical work, in some specialised development institutions working in public-private partnerships are involved. Some cities contract out key analyses concerning the local economy, its specific sectors, and the international perception of the city to specialised, internationally recognised consultancy companies. The interpretative-diagnostic part usually includes a SWOT analysis. Some cities concentrate all ideas into one SWOT model, while others generate a series of parallel SWOT analyses according to partial aspects of local life. Nevertheless, not all cities follow the SWOT scheme completely: some define only strengths and weaknesses, some employ specific approaches.

The vision of the city belongs to the shortest (2-3 pages) but important part of a development strategy. It briefly outlines a narrow group of themes that are crucial for the future of the city. It defines a certain vision: expectations expressed by the local élite in a long-term perspective. It includes a key statement addressing future development and identifies a series (3-5) of the most significant themes (with a brief comment on the context) around which the future development trajectory should be formed.

It seems that there are two basic approaches in development strategies concerning the scope of development directions as expressed in the structure of the key programming part. There is a group of wide-focus strategies organised around almost all sectors of local life. They have about 8 to 10 strategic directions, and are less frequent among the strategies studied. Such a

very comprehensive understanding is reflected in addressing problems from all the typical sectors of local life, like housing, environment, transport, etc. Development under such an approach is dispersed among too many goals. It may be good for city management and it can improve the quality of many local activities, but it is questionable if it can generate real change. The other group of strategies is narrowly oriented, concentrating on a limited number of development directions (usually between 3 and 6). This approach is more cross-sectoral, oriented to a strict selection of development goals. They attempt to be more efficient, to concentrate and mobilise resources for change, they are clearer, and often bring a new image, a far-sighted vision.

The selection of concrete development directions reflects the usual approaches – part of them reactive (considered as a reaction to the existing internal problems) and part of them proactive (initiating new development themes). The interpretation of a selected direction can be twofold – some cities feel obliged to do what other cities do (there are fields in which all cities compete), while others try to find and do something different (to specialise, to avoid activities in the same or similar fields). The most frequently identified strategic direction in development can be incorporated into a block of activities in transport, transport infrastructure, accessibility (including ICT) and utilities infrastructure. It is perceived as a key factor of urban competitiveness. The second most frequent field is usually mentioned as a 'knowledge-based economy', but also under different names (new economy, investment in knowledge, etc.). The next direction includes the quality of local economic environment, competitiveness of the local economy, support of local 'clusters', and entrepreneurial activity. It documents that these cities are not so much concerned with such issues as unemployment or new jobs, but more with the state and orientation of the local economy. An important group of directions is related to the quality of life (a good living place, advanced society, etc.). Some cities focus on international promotion, external relations, and success in international (European) urban competition.

These and similar directions are often subsequently elaborated in the implementation

section into more detailed goals (priorities, intentions etc.) for each direction that are formulated at a lower level into concrete projects (tasks, objectives). At this project level, some of the strategies are very well elaborated in this implementation section. Defined for each project are the actual and the expected state, costs, implementation procedures and partners, monitoring structures, and indicators.

Compared with other plans, development strategies deal much more with the financial aspect of implementation. Strategic planning also influences and improves long-term financial planning. It provides useful information concerning financial management, modelling of future financial flows, search for additional resources, or partners in financing development activities, etc. However, in a certain number of the strategies studied, this section was missing or the financial aspects were only briefly outlined. Some cities were able to define their financial needs in a longer-term perspective. Some shifted to programme/project financing, which means preparing financial details for each programme/project. Nevertheless, there are activities requiring only organisational measures, reorganisation of financial flows, and adoption of local by-laws.

The phases of strategic planning are very similar in the strategies studied. Three main phases can be distinguished: introductory, strategy preparation, and implementation and monitoring. The introductory phase involves a series of important decisions – on strategy preparation, the approach (expert, participatory, partners), political support, capacities and resources, preliminary surveys, etc. Strategy preparation starts with the presentation of strategic planning to a wider community (introductory workshops, conferences). It includes decisions on the analytical section and its realisation. One of the key parts is the formulation of a vision. The next stage includes the formulation of global goals, formation of working groups, and work on a more detailed subdivision into partial programmes and projects. They are confronted, reviewed, changed and finally adopted in managing structures and finally in the City Councils.

It seems that the parts focusing on implementation, monitoring and evaluation belong to

the weakest in the strategies studied. However, in some of the strategies regular monitoring and evaluation procedures and rules were defined, as well as related indicators. In other projects clear definitions of usually quantitative indicators were set for all activities, including the time horizon. In the case of certain cities, the selection of indicators was a special priority. Some cities regularly (annually) release quite extensive reports, although they are not efficiency oriented, i.e. they do not state if a change in social and economic development has been achieved. Strategic planning in most of the cities is perceived as a permanent and cyclical activity. After a few adaptations of the existing strategy, they turn to the preparation of a new one, sometimes also with a change of approach. The majority of cities have already gone through several processes of strategy preparation. The most frequent time spread between two strategies seems to be approximately 5-7 years.

Special bodies are established in the process of strategic planning. Their structure depends on the approach to strategy preparation, and they change depending on the phase of preparation. More complicated is the main programming phase when three levels of hierarchical structure have quite frequently been involved, including managing, executive and working bodies. Managing bodies are in the forefront of each strategy. Differing in names, they range in size from 11 to 48 participants usually representing key political, economic and social forces in the city. They focus on making key decisions, guarantee the strategy, its being followed and implemented. Among the leaders are usually Mayors or Vice-mayors of the cities that have the strategy on their agenda. The middle level - executive bodies - is more operational and co-ordinating, with a strong professional background. Here is also vested one of the key roles - the formulation of a strategy submitted to the higher managing body. The lowest level consists of numerous working groups organised around selected themes. Here is a strong participation of local experts, as well as professionals working in specialised self-government departments together with representatives of quite a wide range of local institutions. The number of participants in the working groups is large, usually hundreds of people with various backgrounds. Each working group includes tens

of people (usually 20-30), while the number of groups is highly variable. Strategy preparation is supported by special strong organisational structures (departments, offices, managers) and a well-developed model of communication with the public.

Very frequent participants in strategy preparation are external consultants with different forms of involvement in strategy preparation. Besides individual consultants with various backgrounds, an important role is played by specialised advisory companies. They usually fulfil multiple tasks: from the provision of the basic strategic-planning know-how and training of participants, through facilitating and managing processes leading to strategy preparation, to a sophisticated analytical contribution. They already have experience in the preparation of strategies and hence increase the chance for their successful and quick preparation, partly supporting their neutrality and transparency.

Strategic planning and development strategies in Slovak cities

The Slovak legal system does not know the term 'strategic planning' and for a long time, until 2001, it also did not know the term '(economic) development planning' at the local level. Approaches close to strategic planning have been incorporated into the basic legal framework of the Regional Development Support Act (No. 503/2001 with amendments). This legislation defines the whole hierarchy of development documents prepared under the supervision of various public administration bodies. Under the dual system of public administration (separate lines of state administration and self-government), self-government institutions are responsible for the preparation and implementation of mid-term programme documents: „Programme of the economic and social development of the self-government region“ (at the regional level) and „Programme of the economic and social development of the community“ (at the local self-government level). The economic and social targeting of programmes was extended by a 2004 amendment also onto the fields of environmental development and cultural development.

The mentioned planning legislation only defines the basic structure of the documents. First, it should contain analyses of the socio-economic development of a community (city), main directions of its development, as well as definitions of targets and primary needs. Secondly, it should define tasks and priorities in the development of technical and social infrastructure, environmental management, education, culture, and other fields. Moreover it should include a proposal of financial and administrative implementation. This structure is not obligatory and local self-governments are quite free in adopting their programmes. A few years after the key legislation had been adopted, the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development (2004) issued a 'manual' with more detailed instructions concerning programme preparation. However, this manual is also considered to be merely a recommendation.

In practice, this means that one of the first tasks in strategy preparation is the formulation of one's own structure, mostly taking into account local capacities, available resources, time, approaches, etc. Besides the mentioned manual, as a result of such freedom there have appeared other guidebooks accommodating the basic requirements expressed in the Act. They are mostly prepared by various bodies that would like to influence the processes of local programme preparation (e.g. environmentalists), or commercial institutions interested in direct participation and involvement in programme preparation. Most institutions experienced in planning business have developed their own methodologies that they negotiate and adjust to local needs. The scope of their involvement is very diverse and varies according to the stage of programme preparation and implementation. Some of them provide only external expert support or facilitation and management of the processes of preparation, while others are deeply involved at all stages, including the preparation of final versions next submitted to local councils for approval. In the case of Bratislava, after experimenting with its own strategies of development preparation, the city contracted a specialised study addressing the problem of working out a suitable method for the preparation of its own strategy oriented towards its specific needs (Academia Istropolitana Nova,

2007). As a result of the above developments, there are no uniform strategies in Slovakia. Cities shape them according to their needs, professional capacities, and financial resources available for external support. It is readily visible in the very diverse titles of strategies. While some of them employ the term used in the legislation - „Programme ...“, other titles run: „Strategic plan of economic development ...“, or „Strategy of development ...“, including also the name of the city and the time span involved.

Until the Regional Development Support Act had been passed, cities mostly incorporated part of 'strategic' development intentions into the obligatory physical planning documents (especially Master Plans, and plans of specific zones). As Kling (2006) pointed out, municipalities only sporadically recognised a need for preparation of local development strategies based on strong involvement of various local stakeholders, and invested into their preparation. Only two cities made an attempt at a strategy during the 1990s: Bratislava (in fact, two strategies - 1993 and 1999) and Trenčín (a strategy, later followed by a 1995-1996 strategic plan). The leading role in their preparation was played by the City Offices and invited experts, but in the case of Trenčín, the preliminary strategy was worked out by a specialised, university-based institute of local and regional development. Bratislava strategies had a specific status: since they were not adopted by the City Council as binding documents, they had no implementation power, but they were supposed to be taken into account in city decision-making. Those strategies can be considered 'zero generation' since they were the first attempts in Slovakia, with limited influence and no attention paid to financial and administrative measures. They were also constrained by the limited powers and resources of local self-government and insufficient recognition that they should deal with economic development, and not rely on market forces and activities of the central state.

The development strategies devised just after 2000 can be put together as 'first generation'. Some cities recognised a need for them. They were in contact with strategies being prepared for cities in the neighbouring states, and it was clear that such documents would soon be intro-

duced into the Slovak legal system of planning. Lack of strategic planning documents was also recognised by foreign institutions that decided to initiate pilot strategies and support the initial phase of strategic planning in Slovakia. For this reason, a typical feature of those first-generation strategies was their preparation with significant foreign assistance. The support was provided by the USAID (such strategies were assisted by the Czech-American Berman Group co-operating with Slovak local AI Nova) and the World Bank/Bertelsmann Foundation. From our sample, three cities had worked out their first strategies by the year 2002. It means that a certain standard of strategic planning was transferred into Slovakia, since the devised strategies followed the good practice of strategic planning world-wide.

The latest 'second-generation' strategies reflect an important shift in the perception of strategic planning as a standard development tool with a clear legal position and features of its own. To date (2007), all the cities in the studied sample have already prepared, or are preparing (Nitra, Bratislava), their strategies. The approaches are more diverse, foreign support not so important. There have emerged more Slovak institutions able to participate in their preparation. Besides the mentioned AI Nova, they now include the F.A. Hayek Foundation and M.B. Consulting. Some cities have decided to prepare their strategies by their own City Office means, assisted by invited external, mostly local participants (Žilina, Prievidza).

The time span of development strategies varies, partly due to the fact that they were being prepared over a longer period, from 2002 to 2007. Nevertheless, the most typical feature is adjustment of the planning period to the EU programming period 2007–2013. It is best observed in the latest strategies (e.g. Banská Bystrica, the new strategy in Trnava). Strategies from the first and early second generations are often 'open' in their time perspective. Beside a clearer programming period of the strategies, the visions included within their texts often refer to an outlook period until 2020.

The preparation of a development strategy took Slovak cities a shorter time compared with the international sample (which includes much larger cities). In many cases their strategy was

prepared within one year or even less. The local milieu of those cities is not so complicated, there was usually quite a strong political interest to have such a strategy, external evaluation was reduced, analytical studies were standard, not requiring specialised know-how, in most cases experienced consultant companies were used, and the involvement of City Office staff was great. Those cities also lack strong conflicts of interests, and participatory approaches were applied without any paralysing consequences. Citizen participation was not extensive and conflicting. In most cases, texts of the strategies were of reasonable length, not exceeding 40 pages (not counting various, mostly analytical, supplements), which made them quite executive documents. Although in most cases the preparation procedure followed the principles of partnership and participatory planning, the cities and their partners were able to manage quite a large number of working groups and participants efficiently (usually exceeding one hundred people of various institutional origin).

The interest of local representatives in the development of their city and the surrounding region is among the most often mentioned reasons for the preparation of a plan. Cities also frequently emphasise the existing legal system as a framework for strategy preparation. They often see a strategy as an agreement between the city and all other partners about the future direction of the city. They consider the strategy as a basic document providing the groundwork for all other activities and action plans in the city. There has also often been a search for one's own development possibilities, activation of internal resources and support for the future growth of the local economy, as well as attracting external resources. An improvement in the local living conditions and business environment, sustainable urban development are also frequent targets. A strategy also identifies an aspiration of a city, and looks for possibilities to implement development goals.

The structure of strategies of the Slovak cities in principle follows the general structure of three sections: analysis, programming and implementation. Two main groups of strategies can be identified, as in the international sample: more standard, narrow-focus strategies versus extensive, 'all-sectors' strategies. There are two

cities (Žilina, Prievidza) that after an introduction turned directly to listing quite numerous standard fields of local life (more than 10). Both are early 'second generation' strategies (2003, 2004), prepared mostly by City Office and City Council professionals. Although for each 'sector' they identified the situation, priorities, measures, as well as financing in general, those strategies can hardly be considered easy to implement. They belong to extensive strategies, attempting to cover all aspects of local life, not respecting the principle of concentrating activities and resources on a narrow group of priorities.

All cities paid much attention to analytical and diagnostic work, some of them in the form of a City Profile. They focused mostly on all fields of local life, paying more attention in some cases to an evaluation of the local economy, local business environment, citizens' opinions, population development trends, environmental issues, as well as local self-government practices and capacities. The authors were mostly local self-government professionals, local experts, and selected analyses were prepared by external consultants. All strategies usually provided a SWOT analysis, mostly also by selected fields of local life.

The cities also formulated their strategic visions. It was usually very short, compared with the international sample. Most of them provided a brief statement (one or a few paragraphs, sometimes very general), without any longer commentary. Only a minority of the cities formulated their priority themes important for future development immediately in the same section of text. Some cities also defined visions for the fields of action selected within their programming/project sections.

Development directions/themes are quite similar among the Slovak cities. The most frequent main themes focus on local economy development. It is expressed by theme titles like economic growth, business development, entrepreneurship, business environment, attraction of investment (including external), etc. Close attention is paid to themes in transport and utilities infrastructure, which is considered a very strong limitation to development in most cities. Almost in all the cities, identified as important for future environment is the quality of

life, including especially health and security issues. Much attention is paid to human resources as well as social capital and social services. Some cities also list the need to improve the functioning of local self-government, better public services, and greater focus on the citizen. Among economic priorities we can usually find tourism and industry.

The terminology employed in the implementation, financing, monitoring and evaluation sections of development strategies is highly individual, sometimes with the same title used to describe different purposes in different strategies. Key themes (global goals, directions, themes, topics) are usually grouped hierarchically into sets of more detailed specific tasks (programmes, activities), as well as concrete projects (measures). Especially those documents which have been prepared with the help of external consultants list a great number of them (e.g. as 'project files'), usually consisting of a standard set of data relevant to implementation (a short description, timing, financing, responsible partners, indicators), as known from the other cities around the world.

Some of the cities do not provide detailed information about the implementation and financing of each of the activities/projects they plan to carry out, but present only a general outline of financing in a separate part of the development strategy. The process of strategy preparation and implementation has led in some cities to the development of an internal institutional innovation within the City Office structure as well as building joint partnerships with other local actors. It is similar in the case of managing implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of activities, whose principles are defined in the strategies, but in a less concrete form. It reflects the introductory stage of work within the strategic planning framework (e.g. indicators for activities are not defined already in the strategy, and should be defined later). Among the usual parts of development strategies we can also find a section addressing communication with citizens.

Local self-governments have always played the main role in strategic planning in Slovak cities. They decide about the form of preparation, especially the scope of external participation. The pressure of time (to have a strategy

quickly) and financial issues (a scarcity of resources) caused some cities to decide to draw up their plans mostly within their own City Office structures. The phases of work are similar as in the international sample, but the last phase – implementation and monitoring – is hard to evaluate right now. However, there is clear evidence of improvement. There are already good examples of systematic monitoring, evaluation and updating of priorities. Some cities build permanent administrative structures dealing predominantly with strategy implementation, specific commissions meet and assess progress and problems of implementation, and regular reports are prepared and submitted to the highest local-government bodies. Some cities have already acquired a specialised electronic information and monitoring system for strategic planning that allows efficient management of many tasks related to strategy implementation.

As in the other cities, also in Slovak cities special bodies are established for strategy preparation, usually at two levels. The lower level consists of working groups organised around key themes or sectors of analysis. Placed at the higher level are co-ordinating and managing bodies (e.g. Commissions, Co-ordination Groups). Only some cities have introduced a third level, a narrower top managing group consisting of local leaders (a Steering Committee, a Stakeholders' Group), including top local politicians (which are included in the higher level in the two-level structure).

Planning approaches to various scales are those typical of participatory and communicative planning (Maier, 2001; Feinstein, 2000). The usually required partnership principle also has a different scope: while in some of the cities external partners (i.e. from outside the local government) have participated from the very beginning as members of working groups, in other cases they only provide information and comments on a current draft of strategies. There are also cases representing a shift of strategic planning towards becoming a permanent and cyclical field of the local planning system. A new (second) development strategy is being worked out in Trnava, one of the most successful Slovak cities (hosting plenty of foreign investors in its urban region, e.g. PSA Peugeot-Citroen, Sony, etc.). Its booming local economy

has generated a new set of priorities within a short time. Also Bratislava is intending to prepare a new development strategy based on the experiences with two previous strategies.

Conclusion

Slovak cities are approaching a standard level of strategic planning activities as known from international experience. They are prepared within the usually accepted structures and procedures. The smaller size of Slovak cities accounts for e.g. shorter time of preparation, not so ambitious goals, or less complicated structures. More advanced analytical studies should replace the descriptive style of certain analytical parts. The implementation and financial aspects of strategies in some cities should be worked out in much greater detail.

The most important factors behind strategy preparation have been an effort to improve the local economic situation, the new development-planning legislation introduced, and an attempt to improve access to the EU development funds. The EU framework in particular seems very influential at present. Attempts are made to fit plans into the relevant priorities and adjust strategies to the EU programming period. Strategies move closer to the prevailing meaning of strategic planning in modern times – being more change-oriented, concentrating on narrow groups of goals, concentrating resources, focusing on implementation.

Strategic planning application in Slovak cities has a positive impact on their functioning. Besides the effort to induce major changes in the cities' future, they improve many aspects of local life quite quickly. Local self-governments have started to address certain fields of local life more efficiently. They have also established a new, stable institutional framework, and they now deal much more extensively with their own future. What is important is that within the strategic planning procedures the cities build links and set up joint bodies across the local economy and society. Thanks to strategies, they know much more about their economies and communities. Strategic planning also seems to be a permanent part of local management and the planning culture.

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