



COMPARISON OF SELECTED ASPECTS OF REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

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The aim of the article is to compare the selected aspects of the regional self-government in the Visegrad Group countries regarding their defined competence frameworks and the current situation. The article is descriptive, based on the answers to a questionnaire addressed to the representatives of regional governments in the V4 countries. Its added value is to bring awareness of the differences of the public administration systems in the mentioned countries and to provide inspirations and examples of good practice based on a comparison of selected aspects.

Key words: regional self-government, Visegrad Group, competence framework
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1 INTRODUCTION

The present article aims to map the current state of the competence framework at the regional level in the Visegrad Group countries. The problem under study is the varying degree of decentralisation applied at regional level in these countries. Within the framework of a qualitative approach, which is characterized by non-numericism, interpretation of social reality or focusing on the depth of the phenomenon under study, the present article will use descriptive and comparative methods. In this article we will focus on selected aspects of the regional level in the Visegrad Four countries and compare them with each other. The comparisons will concern the current competence framework, identification with the existence and functioning of the regional level, participation of

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citizens in regional elections or the knowledge of the competence framework of the regional level by the inhabitants of the regions in the Visegrad Group countries.

The article is based on the answers provided by the heads of regional level in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary to the questionnaire on the regional level in the Visegrad Group. Only a few headings of questions were selected from the questionnaire for the article. The present article is a follow-up to an article comparing 20 years of regional self-government in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The comparison concerned the election of the highest representative of the regional level, its current competence framework, the financing system, regional powers during crisis situations and, finally, the main challenges for the regional level in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. (Janas – Jánošková 2022)

Before proceeding to a comparison of selected aspects of the regional level in the Visegrad Group countries, let us define the regional level in general. Its general and applicable definition is to be found in the Draft European Charter of Regional Self-Government, according to which „regional self-government denotes the right and the ability of the largest territorial authorities within each State, having elected bodies, being administratively placed between central government and local authorities and enjoying prerogatives either of self-organisation or of a type normally associated with the central authority, to manage, on their own responsibility and in the interests of their populations, a substantial share of public affairs, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity“. (Draft European Charter of Regional Self-Government 1997)

It can be stated that the regional level across the European continent is heterogeneous and different degrees of decentralisation can be traced from one country to another. The Visegrad Group (V4) countries - the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary - are no exception, with similarities but also differences in their competence frameworks, reflecting the different degrees of decentralisation applied in their public administration systems. As Nižňanský states, decentralisation is the process of transferring part of the competences from the state administration to the local government. (Nižňanský 2006; Nižňanský – Hamalová 2013; Nižňanský et al. 2014)

The European Union is a community of regions that differ from each other in socio-economic, cultural, and natural specificities. In the case of the countries of the Visegrad Group, at the level of regions we speak of self-governing regions or higher territorial units in Slovakia, self-governing regions in the Czech Republic, voivodships in Poland and counties in Hungary. Despite the differences in names and competences, their common feature, as is the case with the regions in the other Member States of the European Union, is the all-round and continuous development of the territory to achieve growth and prosperity and to meet the needs of their inhabitants. Regions in the V4 countries are also implementers of selected public policies representing a wide range of competences.

2 THE CURRENT COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK AT REGIONAL LEVEL IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

Before proceeding to a competence framework, we would like to underline to fact that while Hungarian counties were in the early 1990s shortly after the change from a communist to a democratic regime, reformed thanks to a large reform of local self-government, for the Polish voivodships the end of the 1990s was significant years, when changes in their number were introduced. With the emergence of the regional level at Slovakia and Czech Republic were envisaged in the 1990s, but in fact their real creation was realized at the beginning of the new millennium.

A significant difference valid for the regional level in the V4 countries is also the multi-tiered nature of the local government level in Poland, which differs in its three-tiered nature from the systems in the other Visegrad Four countries. The differentiation also includes the fact that even though each higher unit of local self-government in Poland always includes a certain number of lower units, there is no question of the existence of a relationship of superiority and inferiority. At the same time, each level of Polish local government has its own independent competences. (Šmíd 2023) The three-tier system of self-government can be said to be a rare phenomenon, since in most European countries the division is implemented at two levels. Therefore, the Polish system of self-government can be compared to the Nordic model, which is applied in Norway³.

The main task of the regional self-government in Slovakia is to ensure care for the all-round development of the territory, in addition to the creation and implementation of the programme of social, economic, and cultural development of the territory of the higher territorial unit. The Slovak regions are responsible for roads of II. and III. class, regional social service facilities, secondary education, its own cultural institutions, regional development, tourism, and, in the field of health, for regional hospitals and the licensing of outpatient doctors. This is all areas except defence and security. The highest representative of the region is the chairman, his main task is the administration of the higher territorial unit and its external representation. (Gonos – Nemeč 2015; Matlovič – Matlovičová 2011; Act on Self-Governing Regions 2002) According to the heads of the Slovak regions, after 20 years of existing the regional level, there is a space for a new division of competences between the state, the regions, and the municipalities, in the form of further public administration reform, which should aim at strengthening the competences in which self-governing regions are effective.⁴

The competences of the Czech regions include powers in the field of transport and communications, health care, spatial planning, protection of healthy living

³ More information about the Nordic model is available in the article of Daniel Klimovský entitled Self-Governments in EU – Norway. (Klimovský 2013)

⁴ More information about the need of the reform of public administration and the principles of new division of competences is available in the article of Barbora Jánošková entitled Future of Slovak Regional Self-Government or Quo Vadis Self-Governing Region. (Jánošková 2020)

conditions, social welfare, education and training in secondary education, cultural development, and protection of public order. (Klimovský 2010a; Act on Regions 2000) In connection with these powers, we would also like to point out the powers of the governor during crisis situations. The position of the governor, who is indirectly elected, is weaker, except for crisis situations in which the Integrated Rescue System falls under the governor. (Grejták et al. 2002; Act on the Integrated Rescue System and amending certain acts 2000) As we wrote in the article devoted to comparison of 20 years of self-government in Czech Republic and Slovakia (2022), the Integrated Rescue System requires the cooperation with the bodies at the central level. (Janas – Jánošková 2022)

While regional governors consider the competences of regions to be sufficient given their position in the public administration system, on the other hand, they have many responsibilities and public expectations attached to them, which do not always entail sufficient competences. The governors also point to the need to strengthen the funding of the competence framework.

The legislative framework for the competences of the Polish voivodships consists of the 2009 Act on the Voivodship and the Voivodship State Administration and the 1998 Act on Voivodship Self-Government. To the competences belong the health care, cultural protection and social services and care, also the planning and realization of different development strategies, modernization, public security and activation of the labour market. Voivodships in Poland take care about the higher education. (Klimovský 2011) For the future, the marshals of the Polish regions are convinced that the self-government competencies should be strengthened in favour of the inhabitants, in the areas of the health care, education, distribution of the revenues and the distribution of the funds from the European Union. At the same time, the representatives of the Lubuskie Voivodship point out that the scope of regional self-government competences in Poland has been systematically reduced since 2015. Together with them, we believe that this is the wrong direction, which stiffens decision-making processes and, above all, distances decision-making centres from citizens. It is therefore important to proceed with the restoration of the competences that were taken away from local authorities after 2015.

Representatives of the Małopolskie Voivodship provided their perspective on voivodship self-government, according to which the regional level performs an extremely important function in the Polish three-tier model of decentralisation as an entity that initiates, shapes, and monitors regional development. It is precisely the definition of strategies and the implementation of development policy that is one of the basic tasks of the voivodship self-government, as defined in the Act of 5 June 1998. It emphasises the role of the voivodship in stimulating economic activity and innovation, shaping the territorial order, caring for the natural environment, or fostering regional identity and cultural values. This is why they are inclined to state that the basis of the voivodship's self-government activities is the definition and implementation of strategic measures, considering the identified needs. According to the representatives of the Małopolskie

Voivodeship, the competences of regional self-government in Poland are extremely multifaceted, they are broadly conceived, thanks to which the regions in many areas can shape their policies by interpreting them at the level of strategic documents.

Counties in Hungary are currently responsible for spatial/territorial development, rural development, spatial planning, and coordination activities under the Local Government Act of 2011. In the case of spatial development and spatial planning, the competences of the counties can be considered sufficient. However, in the case of rural development, the tasks of the municipalities are neither specified in the Regional Development Act nor in any government regulation.

In the 1990s, although Hungarian counties were not as strong as municipalities in terms of the level of competences, they nevertheless had a relatively large number of competences. These included, for example, the field of education, in which they took care of second-level schools, secondary schools, special schools, as well as the education of children who were permanently placed in medical institutions and so on. Their remit also included the care of museum objects and historical documents or county libraries and museums. In terms of competence, Hungarian counties were also responsible for tasks related to regional planning, tourism, employment, or environmental protection. (Horváth 2010; Klimovský 2010b)

In this context, the representatives of Pest County consider that there are areas within the competence framework of the counties that need to be strengthened. In their view, adjustments in the functioning of certain institutions at county level would strengthen the identity of the county, such as the county archives, the county museums, or the county library.

Representatives of the Győr-Moson-Sopron County add that regional self-government also performs statutory state administration functions. In addition, the county authority helps municipalities on request or based on a cooperation agreement, ensures professional coordination in the performance of certain tasks, and maintains contacts with social, administrative and interest bodies.

In the light of the above, we present a summary of this point:

- Regional representatives are the most accurate to represent citizens and their interests.
- Regional representatives across the V4 countries say that it is important to maintain the current level of the scope of competences, but on the other hand they add that, based on an analysis and reassessment, it is necessary to strengthen and extend the competence framework of the regions, including, of course, the financial coverage of the new competences.
- The advantage of the regional level, in the context of the above, is that it is closer to the citizen than the national level.

- The strengthening of the framework should be based on the principle of subsidiarity, i.e., no level of government should perform tasks that are already performed by someone else, to avoid duplication of competences.
- A recommendation in the context of the current competence framework is the preparation of strategic documents with a multiannual scope, defining the basic direction of the region in each area for a given period.
- In the context of the competence framework, there is also a need to build up a network of cooperation between the regions and territorial stakeholders such as local authorities.
- However, in addition to the strengthening and extension of the competence framework, there is also the possibility of weakening it, i.e., the centralisation of powers, a situation which, according to the representatives of some regions, is being experienced in Poland and Hungary.

3 IDENTIFICATIONS WITH THE EXISTENCE AND FUNCTIONING OF THE REGIONAL LEVEL IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

According to the Chairman of the Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia SK8 and the Chairman of the Trnava Self-Governing Region Jozef Viskupič, the history of the territory of Slovakia is linked to regional formations, which include the historical counties or the three regions into which Slovakia was divided under socialism in the 20th century. The current situation of eight self-governing regions with different tasks from those performed by the departments in the past is a situation with which Slovaks have not identified themselves very much. Twenty years is a sufficient lesson for the future to ensure that the self-government dimension is managed from the bottom up. The very existence of higher territorial units is enshrined in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, but recently there have also been voices calling for the abolition of regions.

The situation is complex in that the current self-governing regions and their division are the result of an artificial division of the territory into eight units with which people do not identify geographically, culturally, socially, historically, or otherwise. Even today, many people find their identification with regions such as Novohrad or Gemer, or with towns and cities that are an understandable source of identity for them.

The way forward, therefore, is to clarify the competence framework, which is an opportunity and a space for improving the current situation. This is also necessary to ensure that residents know what they can turn to the municipalities for and what the higher territorial units can help them with. According to the Chairman of the association of Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia SK8, all this relates to better communication of the irreplaceable roles of the regions in the direction of regional development and their individual competences. Based on our own practical experience, we fully agree that to

raise the profile of the regional level and its competence framework, it is necessary to focus on a variety of activities and projects whose main objective is to communicate the powers of the regions to their inhabitants.

There is no unambiguous opinion among the governors of the Czech regions on this issue. There are regions in which the governors perceive, based on their own experience, that to a large extent the population of the regions has identified with the established regional level, it can be stated that there is also an obvious coexistence of people, companies, and other organisations with the region. In general, however, the representatives of the regional level in the Czech Republic themselves acknowledge that it is a never-ending story and that there is still work to be done to ensure that the population of the regions identifies with the established regional level. On the other hand, they confirm that in the system of public administration in the Czech Republic, the regions are a solid part of the system.

Experience, in the words of the Marshal of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, shows that the inhabitants show little regional identity; rather, they identify with the local level. The Polish marshals agree that the level of interest of the population in local elections, as well as in the commitments of the local government and the activities of its bodies, is unsatisfactory. On the other hand, some voivodships also have positive experiences with regional identification of the population.

About the above statement about the unsatisfactory interest of the population in local elections, among the Polish voivodships we would like to point out the inhabitants of Pomeranian Voivodship, who are among the most active voters - in the last regional elections (i.e., in 2018) as many as 53% of the voters came to the polls, which was the highest result in Poland. As an elected representative himself, the Marshal is proud to have such an important level of support in society. In his words, this is mainly because the citizens see that the actions of the Pomeranian Voivodeship's leadership are in their best interests and their needs are always priority for its representatives. On the other hand, the Marshal of the Pomeranian Voivodeship admits that the level of regional identification of the Voivodeship's inhabitants is still insufficient.

The representatives of the Lubuskie Voivodeship assess satisfactorily the identification of the inhabitants of the regions with the established regional level and their participation in the regional elections.

The representatives of the Małopolskie Voivodeship looked at the issue of identification of the population with the existence and functioning of the regional level from the perspective of the Visegrad Four. In their view, the citizens' distrust of the state and the low level of political participation are negative consequences faced by all the countries of the former Eastern bloc. Voter turnout in Poland is therefore not yet as high as in Western countries, but it is gradually increasing. This is evidenced by the turnout in local elections, which in 2018 reached 54.9% in the whole country, compared to 47.4% four years ago, i.e., in 2014. This is also the best result compared to the Visegrad Group

countries. The turnout of the residents of the Małopolskie Voivodeship in local elections has also increased significantly. In 2014, 48.5% of the region's population took part in the elections. Four years later, it was already 52.2%, which was the second highest result in the country.

Regarding the attitude towards the region, analyses show that about 90% of the population expresses their affection for Małopolskie, saying that Małopolskie Voivodeship is a good place to study, relax and has an interesting cultural offer, which is certainly pleasing and encouraging that citizens feel comfortable in the region, and undoubtedly a motivation for further work for the benefit of the voivodeship. Of course, the representatives of the Małopolskie Voivodeship do not think that this automatically means recognition of local self-government or this level of government in general, but they believe that positive changes are also taking place in this area, as the work of local self-government is becoming increasingly visible. Among concrete examples, they cite the new trains of the Małopolskie Railway, which residents use to commute to work and school, the cultural institutions they use, and the vast number of events, conferences and culinary festivals that promote traditions, identity, and the link to the region. It is likely that the level of recognition will also increase soon as a result. The regional seat - the city of Kraków - plays a key role in the region's recognisability; as one of Poland's largest metropolises, a thriving scientific centre, with a dynamic labour market, it also has an impact on the whole region. They are inclined to argue that the recognition of a city like Kraków influences people's identification with the region.

According to the representatives of the Łódź Voivodeship, the inhabitants of the region identify themselves with the established regional level. This is because they are characterised by an intense sense of local identity, they are interested in matters concerning their communities and they take an active part in the life of their homes. For most of them, the capital of the voivodeship is the centre of scientific, social, cultural, and administrative life.

Regarding regional identity in Hungary, the representatives of Pest County state unequivocally that there is none. They have a similar perception in Fejér County. The established regional level has no historical background, as in Slovakia.

In conclusion, let us summarize the main points of this chapter:

- Across the V4 regions it is possible to identify various levels of identification with the existence and functioning of the regional level, which is also reflected in various levels of interest in regional elections or local government commitments.
- The boundary between the municipal and regional levels of government is not entirely clear to the public; on the other hand, the existence of belonging / internal cohesion of people, companies and other organisations with the region cannot be overlooked.

- The reason for not identifying with the region in its current form may be the absence of a historical background or the artificial division of the territory in terms of geography, culture, social context, or history.
- The reason for low regional identity in the V4 countries may be the general mistrust of citizens in the state and low level of political participation.
- The solution to a better regional identity and identification of the population with the territory is to clarify the competence framework, more media coverage of the regional level, more media space in the public media, better communication of the irreplaceable roles of regional self-government in the direction of regional development and its individual competences.
- Obtaining a higher degree of identification of citizens with the existence and functioning of the region requires systematic and continuous work on the visibility of the regions' activities and the organisation of a broad range of cultural and social events for the population, and continuous communication with them is also necessary.
- Regional settlements should also play a role in the recognition of the region because it is through this, if it is recognised by the population, that people can more easily identify with the region.

4 PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN THE VISEGRAD FOUR COUNTRIES

In this chapter we will take a closer look at the participation of residents in regional elections in the different Visegrad Group countries and the context of voter turnout. At the end of the chapter, in addition to a general summary, we will also present a table with the figures of the participation of residents in last regional elections.

In 2017, an amendment to the electoral law was adopted in Slovakia, which combined the second most popular election in Slovakia, i.e., the municipal elections of mayors, mayors and members of town and municipal councils with the elections to higher territorial units. This was expected to have an impact on the overall turnout in regional elections, which has not been high in recent years and was indicative of the low interest in regional self-government⁵. According to Jozef Viskupič, the chairman of SK8, with

⁵ The turnout in the first elections to the higher territorial units in December 2001 was more than 26% in the first round, and more than 22% in the second round. The second regional elections in 2005 were characterised by the lowest turnout yet, with over 18% of voters turning out in the first round and just over 11% in the second round. In the next regional elections in 2009, turnout in the first round was close to 23%, and in the second round it was over 18%. The next regional election in 2013 attracted over 20% of voters in the first round, and the second round turnout was again

the amendment of the electoral law, the lack of interest in regional self-government will no longer be measured by participation in the elections.

In the words of the chairman of the Association of Self-Governing Regions SK8, Jozef Viskupič, regional state administration needs to be shaped by transferring the tasks of district authorities to local government, which he sees as the biggest challenge of decentralisation and reform of public administration. In the 2017 regional elections, turnout was at 30%, which provided room for improvement. Therefore, the SK8 Chairman, on behalf of all regional leaders, was curious to see if the change in the electoral law and the merging of local and regional elections into one election would translate this decision into a higher turnout, which was eventually confirmed and the turnout in the regional elections, which for the first time in the history of independent Slovakia were part of the merged elections, reached a level of almost 44%.

According to the highest representatives of the Czech regions, regional elections in the Czech Republic are somewhere between elections to the Chamber of Deputies and elections to municipal councils in terms of their importance. It can be stated that, for example, compared to the elections to the Senate, the turnout in regional elections is still quite respectable. Even though it is possible to feel the lack of interest on the part of the region's inhabitants or the fact that the region's inhabitants have still not got used to it, despite its twenty years of existence.

The lower turnout stems from the public's feeling that regional politics will not change much in their lives. This is not an alarming situation, but there is interest in the regional elections. Strengthening the competences of the regions, preserving their original status, and therefore not 'nationalising' or restricting them, would help to increase it.

In answering this question, the representatives of the Małopolskie Voivodeship rely on the analysis of the Centre for Public Opinion Research, which, as a specialised centre, conducts opinion polls in Poland. One of them, conducted in 2018, showed that Poles in the mentioned year declared that they attached more importance to local elections, compared to presidential or parliamentary elections, but at the same time showed varying degrees of interest in the decisions of local and regional authorities. In 2018, 40% of Poles declared such interest in the case of regional self-government, 65% in the case of district self-government and 78% in the case of municipal self-government. Compared to 2014, the above indicators have clearly increased, which indicates a gradual increase in awareness and civic activity in the area.

Representatives of the Małopolskie Voivodeship point out that the dualism of administration at the regional level in the form of the existence of a representative of the central administration in the form of a voivodeship governor, i.e., a voivodeship governor and at the same time a voivodeship marshal representing the regional self-government

lower, at over 17%. The highest voter turnout was in the last stand-alone regional election in 2017, at nearly 30%. (Mesežnikov et al. 2022)

may also manifest itself in difficulties in building public awareness of the scope of tasks that the marshal has in his competence. The above statement was confirmed by a 2014 opinion poll conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research. According to it, only 13% of respondents knew the name of the Marshal of their Voivodeship. Higher numbers from the marshal had a member of the municipal council, the mayor, or the mayor. However, they believe that the situation has improved considerably over the last few years, both due to the increasing education of citizens, better access to information, including, for example, the development of social networks, and the measures taken by the voivodeship in the form of opening additional offices of the Marshal's Office in several other Małopolska towns, thanks to which all residents have the same access to direct contact with the regional administration, and thus better identification of activities at the level of the voivodeship.

Table 1: Participation of citizens in the last regional elections in the Visegrad Group countries

	<i>Slovakia (2022)</i>	<i>Czech Republic (2020)</i>	<i>Poland (2018)⁶</i>	<i>Hungary (2019)</i>
Turnout in the last elections	44%	38%	55%	48%

Source: own processing (The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic; The Czech Statistical Office; Broniatowski 2018; Kovács 2019).

Representatives of the Łódź Voivodeship point out that almost half of eligible voters participate in local elections. They believe that, given the national average of participation, this should be considered a satisfactory level of people's interest in what is going on in their region.

County elections in Hungary, as part of local elections, are held on the same day as local elections, so turnout usually depends on local elements. According to counties highest officials, municipal elections, especially the election of mayors, usually motivate voters more than county elections. Voter turnout can be higher, they say, in seats where there is close competition or a popular local candidate.

⁶ The next local elections in which Poles would choose their representatives, namely to the bodies of municipalities, districts, and voivodships, were to be held in 2023. For the first time in history, it was to be a 5-year term of local self-government, with the beginning in 2018 and the end in 2023. President of Poland Andrzej Duda signed a law postponing the date of local elections to the spring of 2024. The elections were to be held in the autumn of 2023, when the term of the Polish Parliament will also end, and parliamentary elections will be held. Although the law, sponsored by the ruling Law and Justice party, did not pass in the upper house of the Senate, where it was rejected by the majority, it found support in the lower house from a strong government majority. Both the opposition and constitutional lawyers criticised the draft amendment. (Ptak 2022)

The main conclusions on the point on turnout in regional elections in the V4 countries are included in the following summary (Table 1):

- Across the V4 regions it is possible to observe various levels of participation in elections, reflecting different levels of interest in the decisions of regional authorities.
- Low participation may be due to a number of factors, including, for example, lack of interest on the part of the population in regional elections, the fact that they have not become accustomed to the regional level, the dualism of governance causing confusion and difficulties in building awareness of the scope of the role of the region and its top representative, or the belief that regional politics will not make much difference in their lives.
- Regions with higher voter turnout rates claim that the higher interest in regional elections is due to people being better educated, better informed and finally, active on social networks.
- However, the current turnout in regional elections in the V4 countries still offers room for improvement.
- Strengthening the competences of the regions, preserving their original status, i.e., not nationalising, or limiting them, but also organising targeted events by the regions to provide citizens with information about the regional level and its impact on the daily life of the population in the region, would help to increase the turnout.
- In conclusion, participation in elections equals people's interest in what is happening in their region.

5 KNOWLEDGE OF THE COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK OF THE REGIONAL LEVEL BY THE INHABITANTS OF THE REGIONS IN THE VISEGRAD FOUR COUNTRIES

After twenty years of the existence of higher territorial units in Slovakia, it can be stated that most people do not know the competences of self-governing regions. This is a statement that is confirmed by the chairmen themselves. People in the regions use the services provided by the higher territorial units daily. Often, this is because they may not be aware that it is the regions that are behind the services in question. An explicit example is suburban bus transport or the management and maintenance of roads of II. and III. class. The situation is slightly better for social services or cultural institutions, where the founder is mentioned. To help people navigate their exclusive competences, the regions need to take care in communicating with the public. Twenty years on, there are still gaps in this area, but it can be said that the situation is slowly improving in public relations. The regions' reputation during the coronavirus pandemic was certainly enhanced by their efforts to engage in the joint fight against COVID-19. During the pandemic, it was often

the higher regional authorities that replaced the district authorities in coordinating the management of the pandemic in the territory. Later, the regions helped the state in vaccinating the population by setting up large-scale vaccination centres. It was through this step that people in Slovakia started coming in direct contact with the regions.

As in the Czech Republic, the inhabitants of a regions tend to view the region, its activities, and its powers through the person of the chairman. The chairman of SK8 himself confirmed this assumption by stating that the names of chairmen are more familiar to most people than the powers of the regional government. According to him, a significant role in recent years has been played by the fact that, popularly speaking, regions have not become a dumping ground for old unnecessary politicians. We think that the election of mostly forty-somethings as chairmen of local government regions, who combine dynamism and the necessary experience, has also been a step forward. We are inclined to the view of the SK8 chairman that these are representatives who are actively making their voices heard and thanks to whom more and more is being heard about the regions. The fact that the residents directly elect the representatives contributes to the higher visibility of the representatives as regional competences.

Even in the question of the knowledge of the competence framework of the Czech regions, there is no unambiguous position of the regional governors. The governor from the Liberec Region confirms, based on his own experience, which includes visits to towns and villages in the region and meeting people, that the inhabitants of the region know and get to know them. The Governor is the head of the region, and the Regional Council and the Regional Parliament have fundamental competences. Most people in the regions still think that the governor can arrange everything in the region, even though he has only one vote in the Regional Council or the Regional Parliament and acts in the position of *primus inter pares* - first among equals. It can be summarised as saying that he can arrange things, but only through the collective bodies of the region.

In the Czech Republic, the competences of a self-governing region are known to about a third, less than a third of the population. However, more than half of the population is very roughly familiar with them. It does not seem that the perception of other public entities, authorities, institutions, and organisations is different on average. The management of the Vysočina Region believes that a considerable proportion of the population knows the name of the governor. The population perceives the Governor as a position of power more powerful than the law attributes to it. They often personify too much, but this is a natural phenomenon. This process is also supported by the media. The knowledge of the governor and the lack of knowledge of the competences of the region on the part of the inhabitants is confirmed by the governor of the Zlín region.

According to the governor of the Karlovy Vary Region, it can be said that the public does not perceive any significant difference in the competences of towns and municipalities, regions, and the state. In his experience, the name of the governor is

known to the inhabitants of the region. A survey of whether and how the public perceives the regional governor through his or her powers is not available.

As far as Poland is concerned, according to the Marshal of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, it can be said that the inhabitants unfortunately have limited knowledge of the competences of the Polish regional self-government and do not know their own representatives. In the Polish context, the inhabitants judge regional self-government through the position of the voivode.

The Marshal of the Pomeranian Voivodeship, based on his more than 10 years of service as Marshal, states that the tendency of knowledge of the competence framework of regional self-government is growing. In his words, people appreciate the good decisions that the leadership of the voivodeship makes and the effects that increase their standard of living in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The organisations of the voivodeship are also very efficient in the implementation of programmes co-financed by EU funds. Thanks to the educational and promotional actions undertaken by the region to increase knowledge of the competence framework, the citizens have also decided to express their support by voting in the regional elections. Recently, according to the Pomeranian Voivodeship representatives, the inhabitants have also started to examine the impact of decisions at national level on their lives, especially harmful ones, and thanks to this they are now better able to distinguish between the different competences. In addition, Poland has a dual system at regional level, with a marshal - the head of local regional government - and a duke - the person entrusted by the central government to ensure the proper implementation of national laws at regional level. It is difficult for people to properly distinguish the competences and areas of activity of both representatives.

The representatives of the Lubuskie Voivodeship believe that the population knows the powers of the voivodeship and the name of the chief representative. They base their argumentation on the fact that although they do not know the results of the current research, the survey conducted about few years ago (i.e., in 2017), which captured the results, showed that the level of knowledge of the respondents in the Lubuskie Voivodeship about the scope of competences of the regional self-government and about the knowledge of its representatives was satisfactory.

According to the representatives of the Łódź Voivodeship, the average inhabitant of the region is characterised by a low legal awareness. Most people manage their daily administrative affairs at the level of a municipality or district, and not at the level of a voivodeship. This lack of knowledge is partly because citizens often do not distinguish between a voivodeship as a unit of state administration at the lowest level and a voivodeship as a unit of local self-government. It is for this reason that they lack knowledge of the scope of the tasks entrusted to each type of administration by law. As the voivodeship marshal is elected by the voivodeship councillors and not by the citizens in direct elections, the officeholders are not known to the wider electorate, who often confuse the office of voivodeship marshal with that of regional governor - duke. It is for

this purpose that the staff of the Marshal's Office takes various initiatives to make the inhabitants of the region aware of the tasks conducted by the regional self-government through the Marshal's Office.

In the case of Hungary, the representatives of Pest County believe that its inhabitants do not know the competences of the region; in the case of the county chairman, they believe that the knowledge of his name among the inhabitants is greater than in the case of the competences of the region. They are inclined to the opinion that the residents do not perceive the powers of the county through its chairman.

Thanks to the more than a thousand years of tradition of the county system, the representatives of Fejér County believe that its population identifies with this territorial meso-level. In terms of competences, its tasks in the field of territorial development are increasingly recognised due to its key role in the coordination and implementation of the Operational Programme for Territorial Development.

The extent to which the public is aware of the regional level's competence framework in Visegrad Group countries and how it can be made more visible can be summarised as follows:

- Across the V4 regions, there is a varying degree of awareness or lack of awareness of the competence framework among the population, despite the daily use of the services provided by the regions.
- Ignorance of competences is often the result of people not necessarily being aware that the regions are behind which service or of distorted perceptions of their functioning and competences.
- The public does not perceive the difference in the competences of public administration - from municipal to regional to national level - as we can confirm from our own working experience.
- In a dual system - state administration and local self-government in the territory - it is difficult to correctly distinguish the competences and areas of activity of the representatives.
- In many regions, the population looks at that level through the chief executive, knowing his name rather than the competences of the regional government; on the other hand, in many regions, where the chief executive is not directly elected by the population, his name may not be known to the wider electorate or the public.
- In general, as the regions have existed longer and longer, and as they function and operate within the public administration system, it can be said that knowledge of the competence framework is increasing.
- The solution to better knowledge is necessarily continuous communication with the public.

- The organisation of targeted events by the regions to provide citizens with information about the regional level and its impact on the daily life of the population in the region or the development of various initiatives to familiarise regional residents with the tasks conducted by the regional administration is essential for the citizens' knowledge of the regional level's competence framework.
- The involvement of the regions in Visegrad countries during the pandemic contributed to their visibility, often replacing other state institutions, coordinating the management of the pandemic in the territory, and contributing to the joint effort to vaccinate the population.

6 INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The regions in the Visegrad Four countries can inspire each other in many areas. The common element that the representatives of the V4 regions consider important is the call for strengthening the current competence framework, including the financial coverage of new competences. Its strengthening finds its justification because the regional level is close to both the inhabitants and the central level, and it is for this reason that they are the most accurate ones to defend the inhabitants and their interests.

The challenge for all regional governments in the Visegrad Four countries will be to organise a range of events and to produce various initiatives to raise the profile of regional government and its competences. Increasing the visibility of the regional level will also involve continuous communication with the public in the years to come. To build regional identification, systematic work will be necessary, including clarification of the competency framework, more media coverage and better and more active communication with the regional population. Equally important will be the building of a network of cooperation with the actors in the territory, reflected in the preparation of strategic documents with a multiannual scope. We are convinced that, thanks to the above-mentioned activities, the participation of the regions' inhabitants in the elections will also improve. At present, there is still room for improvement in the countries of the Visegrad Four in this respect.

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