

# Qualitative assumptions of elected representatives and officers in local self-government in the Slovak Republic

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## Abstract

The quality of representatives' decision making is largely contingent on their qualifications and experience. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the qualitative assumptions of elected representatives and officers in local self-government from the viewpoint of the local inhabitants – the voters. The research was conducted with a sample of selected inhabitants–voters on the local level by questionnaire, in which the inhabitants gave their opinions about their qualitative assumptions regarding the mayor's and council members' public function performance. The inhabitants also gave their opinions on the qualities of the professional staff of the municipal office – the officers. The results showed that the inhabitants prefer credibility and personal authority in the public function performance of elected representatives and the method of communication and a professional approach by officers.

## Keywords

Elected representatives, inhabitants, local self-government, officers, qualitative assumptions.

**JEL Classification:** H11, R28

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# Qualitative assumptions of elected representatives and officers in local self-government in the Slovak Republic

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## 1. Introduction

The management of local self-government is conditional on the method of filling the top managerial positions in local self-government and it relates to the performance of public functions. The performance of a public function means fulfilling the duties arising from the function, which are defined in the terms of the function or the time period and are occupied by a directly or indirectly elected person or one appointment due to special regulations (§137 of the Labour Code).

The manager who is responsible for the implementation or progress of certain activities and goal achievement or the progress of certain activities and goal achievement by organizations – in the condition of local self-government – is the mayor. To be able to perform his job, he needs certain knowledge, skills and characteristics (Urbancová and Linhartová, 2012).

In addition to managers, for the performance of local self-government, local self-government offices' employees – officers – are also important. This is especially due to their implementation of efficiency, productivity and quality, which belong to topics that are frequently discussed in relation to public administration, not only in Slovakia. These three attributes are in fact not only a threat in the form of public budget deficits, but also the result of a social order based on increased demands on the quality of public administration from the perspective of customers and citizens (Vrabková, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the qualitative assumptions of elected representatives and officers in local self-government, especially from the viewpoint of the local inhabitants – the voters. The first part of the paper is focused on different managerial positions on the local level, which are connecting with the establishment of candidates in managerial positions. Then, an evaluation is carried out of the qualitative assumptions of elected representatives and officers in local self-government in the view of the local inhabitants – the voters. The elected representatives of the municipality were evaluated by residents one year

after taking up office. Thereafter, an overview is presented of the criteria that are important in the choice of the mayor in the eyes of the local inhabitants.

## 2. Managerial positions on the local level

In self-government, it is necessary to distinguish two distinctly different groups of managers (see Table 1):

- Elected managers – managers who received their mandate in the municipal elections from residents making a direct choice (the mayor, members of the municipal council),
- Other managers in managerial positions, who reached their mandate by nomination or the choice of municipal bodies.

**Table 1** Managerial positions at the local level\*

| Managerial position      | The municipality as a legal body | Municipality police | BO/CO          | TC                          | NPO      |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Top managers – elected   | Mayor                            |                     |                |                             |          |
| Top managers – nominated | City manager; main auditor       | Chief of police     | Director       | Manager, executive director | Director |
| Middle-level managers    | Department manager               | Commander           | Head of sector |                             |          |
| First-line managers      | Head of sector                   |                     |                |                             |          |

Notes: \* The creation of partial levels of managerial positions in municipalities and the organizations established by them is conditioned by the size category of the municipality and its organizational structure. BO/CO represents a budgetary organization/contributory organization established by the municipality, TC represents a trade company established by the municipality and NPO represents a non-profit organization established by the municipality.

The elected bodies of self-government units decide how efficiently and effectively the funds of municipalities' budgets will be spent. Their responsibility is wide since they rule on the use of public budget

sources, decide on the use of selected tax revenues and meet their citizens every day. The ideal situation would be for qualified experts to decide on the financial flows, and a rule to obtain the prestige of qualified experts to work on committees and other advisory bodies of towns and villages in favour of a community would also be appropriate. However, the practice is very different (Mateides and Závadský, 2005).

The mayor of the municipality is the representative and chief executive authority of the municipality. The mayor's function is a public function. The mayor is the statutory authority of the municipality. A voter for whom no obstacles exist to exercising the vote right and who has reached the age of at least 25 years on the election day can be elected as the mayor. Other conditions and requirements for the candidate for this function are not obligatory by law. The mayor has a duty to intensify his knowledge in order to perform the function of mayor.

Top management is characterized by the predominance of strategic activities; top managers are responsible for the overall performance of their organization. On the middle level, middle managers implement the plans and strategic goals of the organization's management by coordinating the tasks to be performed in such a way that achieves the organization's present goals (Urbancová and Linhartová, 2012).

In performing his functions, the mayor proceeds openly and transparently and shall not prevent the control execution or control provision that authorized internal or external authorities decide to execute. The mayor performs his mandate in conformity with all the citizens of the municipality, including those who did not vote for him. The mayor meets the requirements of the public, which relate to the performance of his functions, the provision of services and the functioning of the office. He does not obstruct the disclosure of information, apart from information that is prescribed by law to remain confidential. The mayor supports all measures that enhance openness and transparency in the performance of his competences, the provision of services to citizens and the functioning of the office.

Claims regarding the performance of mayors are constantly increasing, even in terms of their human and moral qualities, expert and professional skills and experience (Balázová and Papcunová, 2008).

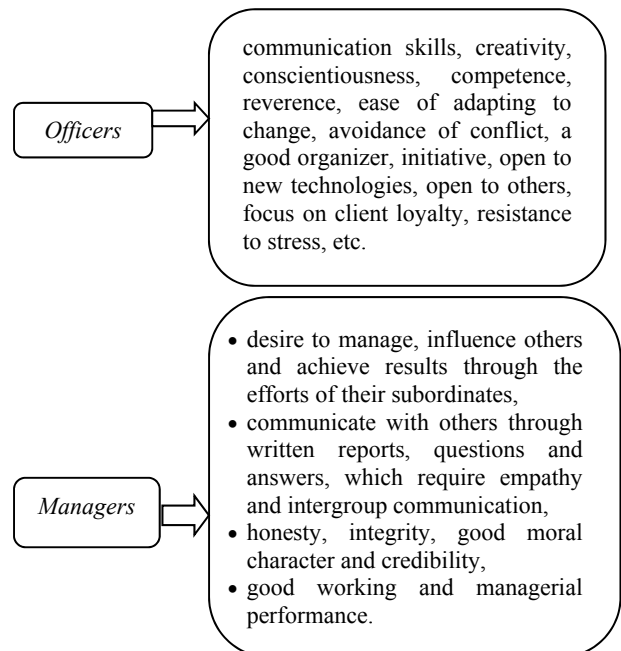
A voter for whom no obstacles exist to exercising his voting rights and who has reached the age of at least 18 years on the election day may be elected as a member of a municipal council. The post of member of a municipal council is usually performed without interruption to the incumbent's employment relationship or similar labour relationship. Members of the municipal council may not be deprived of their rights

or claims arising from an employment relationship or from a similar working relationship due to their performance. Employers allow their employees to perform public functions according to special legislation. An employee who performs a public function in addition to fulfilling his obligations arising from his employment relationship, due to the public function office, may be given time off up to a maximum of 30 working days per calendar year, unless special legislation provides otherwise (§137 of the Labour Code).

The qualifying requirements for officers are different and they depend on the working position that the employee holds in his job (Tej, 2011):

- Officers who act as subordinates should have features that usually inspire them to separate problem solving assigned to them as allocated actions.
- The managers at all levels of the municipality management (from the top to the lowest level) must also be leaders. Beside specialized characteristics, they must have particular personal qualities.

The most requested features of officers and managers in local self-government are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Qualification requirements of employees in local self-government

Source: Tej (2011)

In the last period, the *bottom-up* approach put greater emphasis on the assessment of the quality of public services on the management side. This approach presents the expression of a new type of organizational culture that recognizes the key role of frontline employees, and respectively contact officers

and the public, in the development of quality in public services. It creates an environment for feedback and constructive criticism (Dienerová and Balážová, 2005).

Following this issue, three major components of the quality of self-government management may also be mentioned (Čapková, 2004):

- Knowledge assumptions, mainly in management, economics and law,
- Abilities and skills in communication, teamwork, strategic thinking and decision making,
- The potential to receive and process new information.

The personal and leadership assumptions of candidates are assessed quite often when occupying a competent managerial position. That raises the question of the quality of elected representatives (deputies) in terms of the requirements, skills and experience of leaders with an emphasis on municipal development.

### 3. Formulation of the problem

In the Czech Republic, for the acquisition of any place in the state administration, it is necessary to fulfil certain requirements for qualifications, but the representative mandate, as well as substitution for other indirect free municipal authorities, does not impose any requirements of this nature on its owner (Trhlínová and Stary, 2012). A similar situation exists in Slovakia.

Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to determine, understand and assess the qualitative assumptions of elected representatives of local self-government (mayors and members of municipal councils), as well as the professional staff of the local self-government (officials at municipal offices).

In the environment of public administration, the definition of qualitative assumptions in relation to managerial and executive positions is difficult and there is not always a clear share of necessary leadership and managerial and professional skills. All managers operating in local self-government, as well as ordinary employees in self-government offices, are generally expected to have a professional approach to their office and a responsible approach to conducting the tasks arising from their job description.

At the forefront of self-government management, the specific education level of self-government management entities is obtained as a result of modern approaches. Education and job skills formation become a lifelong process in modern society (Čepelová et al., 2010).

Due to modern approaches, as well as education, the social maturity of self-government management

has also gained prominence. This depends on the personal characteristics of the manager, among which are included the character qualities of a manager, his perception and creative qualities, his qualities of temperament and his somatic features (Hrašková, 2012). Political exposure of the main activities in turn provides many features that are related to the staffing of the institutions of government, and are caused by the effect of other laws governing employment in public administration institutions (Švantnerová and Kožiak, 2005).

New approaches to the roles and responsibilities of local self-government managers extend the defence of democracy (strengthening the values and integrity of the local government and local democracy) and citizen participation. In particular, the mayor has to act as a leader, visionary and strategist. This means that the mayor-manager has a strategic perspective, working with a forward view, moving away from traditional ways of managing and accessing opportunities globally (Fisher, 1999).

### 4. Methodology of the work

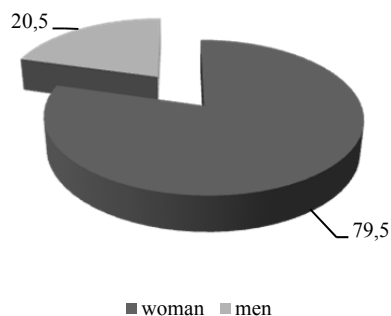
The necessary background information was obtained through a questionnaire survey randomly addressed to residents of different-sized municipalities in Slovakia.

The questions on the questionnaire worksheet were focused on understanding the ideas and expectations that affect the choice of candidates for the posts of mayor and municipal council members and also on ascertaining the opinion of respondents regarding the activities of local government officials. The questions on the questionnaire worksheet were of the closed type: the respondents had to choose from several offered alternatives.

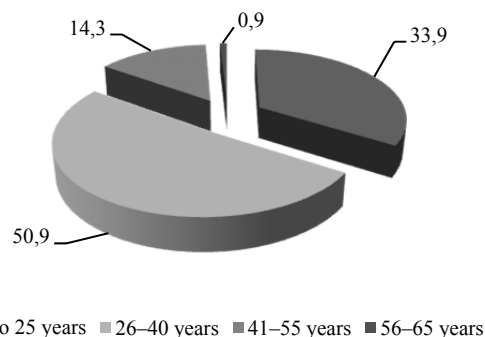
Elected representatives of the municipality were evaluated by residents one year after taking up office (authors' note: municipal elections were held on 27 November 2010).

The questionnaire was anonymous and it was realized in September to December 2011. The total number of respondents who participated in the survey was 112. Of these, 89 were females (79.5%) and 23 were males (20.5%); see Figure 2.

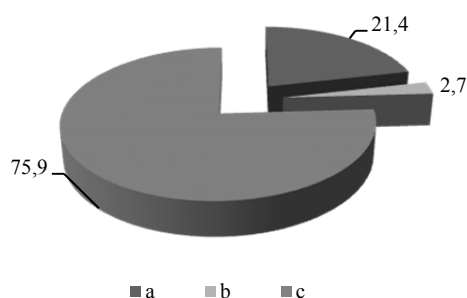
Regarding the age structure of the respondents (see Figure 3), the largest proportion was aged from 26 to 40 years (57 persons, representing 50.9%), and the second-largest group of respondents was under the age of 25 years (38 persons, representing 33.9%). In the age group from 41 to 55 years there were 16 respondents (14.3%), and only 1 respondent fell into the age group from 56 to 65 years (0.9%).



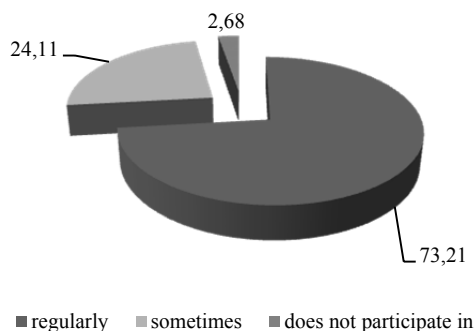
**Figure 2** Structure of the respondents (in %)  
Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding



**Figure 3** Age structure of the respondents (in %)  
Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding



**Figure 4** Education of the respondents (in %)  
Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding  
Legend: a. Respondents have completed secondary education with graduation. b. Respondents have a second degree of university studies. c. Respondents have a first degree of university studies.



**Figure 5** Respondents' participation in elections (in %)  
Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding

The largest number of respondents had completed the first level of higher education (85 respondents, representing 75.9%). Full secondary education had been achieved by 24 respondents (21.4%), and only 3 respondents had a university degree or second degree (see Figure 4).

One of the main characteristics of self-government existence is the democratic exercising of power, which means the right to vote and to be elected. Just the opportunity for elected representatives to influence events on the local level is one of the basic forms, as residents may participate in governance. The interest in the possibility to influence the events in the village or town is demonstrated by the relatively high number of respondents (see Figure 5) who regularly participate in local elections (the total number of respondents was as high as 73.21%, representing 82 respondents). A total of 24.11% of the respondents (27 people) participate in the municipal elections sometimes and only 3 respondents did not participate in municipal elections at all.

## 5. Analysis of the problem

If the intention is to assess the qualitative and quantitative assumptions especially regarding elected local government representatives from the perspective of the respondents, it is important to know about their participation in municipal elections.

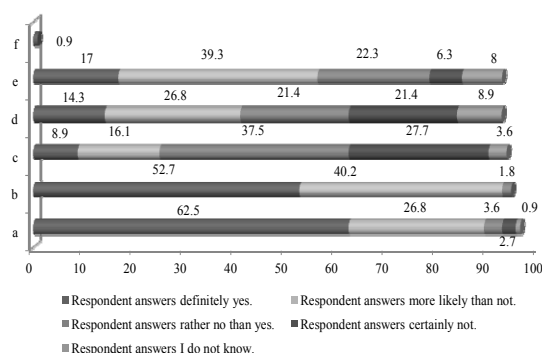
Trhlínová and Starý (2012) argue that negative public relations of the municipality to political representatives are also reflected in the election participation when participation in elections can be seen as a form of expression of satisfaction on the part of citizens. The relatively low level of participation in elections, especially in self-government elections, is seen as an expression of citizens' distrust not only of individual political leaders, but also of the resulting political agreements and coalitions.

It was shown by the survey results that respondents were interested in expressing their dissatisfaction and respectively satisfaction with the elected representatives. This was evidenced by the relatively high number of respondents who regularly participate in

local elections (from the total respondents, it was as high as 73.21%, which represented 82 respondents). A total of 24.11% of the respondents (27 people) take part in the municipal elections sometimes and only 3 respondents from the whole sample do not participate in municipal elections.

The reasons why the inhabitants of municipalities participate in municipal elections differ. In relation to this point, it was attempted to identify the main reasons. It was shown by the survey that only 62.5% of the respondents (representing 70 inhabitants) understood it to be a civic duty, and 52.7% of the respondents (59 inhabitants) expected a positive change in the community development. Some inhabitants vote, therefore, to support the candidacy of their friends or relatives, or respectively people whom they know. It was found that only for 8.9% of respondents is this the main reason why they participate in the election, and for up to 27.7% of the respondents, it is certainly not the reason why they go to elections, although the work of elected representatives, either mayor or members, is often an incentive for voters. It is interesting, however, that it is the main reason for participating in municipal elections only for 14.3% of the respondents (representing 16 inhabitants). Similarly, the answer to the question of whether the main reason for their choice is that it would change the current elected representatives was expressed by 17% of the respondents agreeing with this statement. One of the respondents said that the reason why he participates in municipal elections is that he wants to encourage members who are interested in community development (see more in Figure 6).

The results in Table 2 present the order of importance of the criteria for selecting the mayor from the perspective of the inhabitants – the voters. On the base of our research results, it is possible to conclude that the most important characteristic that influences the choice of inhabitants–voters in the election of mayors is credibility. This criterion is relevant for 76 respondents, representing 67.9%. An equally less important feature is the personality of the candidate (natural authority). This is essential to 66.1% of voters. It is interesting that even though the law does not request professionalism and education of a mayoral candidate, up to 72 respondents (representing 64.3%) choose the mayor on the basis of his education and skills (see Table 2). For the voters, the nature of a candidate is also important. Altogether, 68 inhabitants (60.7% of the respondents) choose their candidate on the basis of ethical and moral characteristics. For more than half of the voters, it is also important that the candidate has experience in local self-government acting. The criterion choice of the lesser evil is decisive only for 8% of inhabitants. Although most of the candidates for the post of mayor act as the representa-



**Figure 6** The reason why the respondents participate in municipal elections (in %)

Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding

Legend: a. I understand elections to be civic duty. b. From the election, I expect a positive change. c. In the elections, I support the candidacy of my friends/relatives/acquaintances. d. In the elections, I support the current mayor. e. In the elections, I would change the current elected representatives. f. I have other reasons for participating in the elections.

**Table 2** Overview of the importance of criteria for choosing the mayor in the eyes of the inhabitants–voters

| Rank | The decision criteria                       | % frequency of possible answers |
|------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1.   | credibility                                 | 67.9                            |
| 2.   | candidate's personality (natural authority) | 66.1                            |
| 3.   | expertise and education                     | 64.3                            |
| 4.   | ethical and moral qualities                 | 60.7                            |
| 5.   | experience in local government              | 51.8                            |
| 6.   | choice of lesser evil                       | 8.0                             |
| 7.   | friend/relative                             | 5.4                             |
| 8.   | political membership                        | 4.5                             |

Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding

tive of a political party, for the inhabitants themselves, is not the most important criterion. Only 4.5% of the inhabitants–voters choose this criterion as the most important criterion for selection. The results of the research about the political affiliation of the candidate for the post of mayor in the Slovak Republic confirm the results of the work of Ryšavý and Šaradín (2010) in the Czech Republic. The authors report that in the Czech Republic, the associations of independent candidates play an exceptional role in local politics; in fact, members of such associations are the most common type of politician in the country. Compared with political party members, non-members are often elected on the basis of preference votes, but have smaller ambitions and often do not stand for re-election. A new finding is that a not insignificant number of political party members began their political career as independents, before joining a political party.

While 60.7% of the respondents choose their candidate on the basis of ethical and moral qualities, 4.5% of the respondents feel that their mayor takes bribes and 41.1% of the respondents are convinced that their mayor prefers personal benefit to public interest (see more in Table 3).

**Table 3** Overview of the importance of criteria for choosing the members of the municipal council through the eyes of the inhabitants–voters

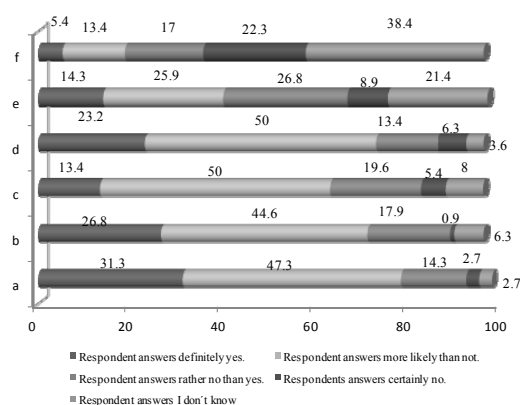
| Rank | The decision criteria                       | % frequency of possible answers |
|------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1.   | credibility                                 | 60.7                            |
| 2.   | expertise and education                     | 58.0                            |
| 3.   | candidate's personality (natural authority) | 56.3                            |
| 4.   | ethical and moral qualities                 | 53.6                            |
| 5.   | experience in local government              | 43.8                            |
| 6.   | political membership                        | 9.8                             |
| 7.   | friends / relatives                         | 5.4                             |

Source: questionnaire survey, own proceeding

The second most important criterion was the personality of the mayoral candidate. This criterion was preferred by 66.1% of respondents. These results confirm the findings of Trhlínová and Starý (2012), who argued that citizens could choose a personality whom they know and with whom they identify at direct elections, although he or she may not have sufficient knowledge and awareness of the management of the municipality and its difficult administration.

It was shown by the results of the survey that respondents prefer similar characteristics in the choice of council members to those in the choice of mayors (Table 3). More than 58% of the respondents prefer council members who are educated and able to solve problems highly professionally. They also prefer candidates who have natural authority (56.3% of respondents) and some experience with the functioning of local self-government (43.8% respondents). Interesting information is that regarding the choice of mayor, only 4.5% of voters prefer his political affiliation; 9.8% of voters decide on the choice of council members on the basis of their political affiliation. Voters, besides political affiliation, often prefer family ties as well. The questionnaire survey results show that in the choice of mayor as well as in the choice of council members this is decisive for only 5.4% of voters.

In solving their everyday problems, inhabitants are frequently faced with the staff office (officers) rather than the council members or the mayor. In the following question, the respondents expressed their opinion on the staff of the office (Figure 7).



**Figure 7** Evaluation of office staff (in %)

Source: Questionnaire survey, own proceeding

a. The staff choose an appropriate way of communicating with citizens. b. The staff have a responsible approach to the tasks. c. The staff have professionalism. d. The staff are welcoming. e. The staff gain personal benefit from the work in the office. f. The staff have no problem with taking a bribe.

The method of communicating with inhabitants was evaluated relatively positively, as 31.3% of the respondents were satisfied and 47.3% were more satisfied than dissatisfied with the way they are treated by officers, when they approach them to solve their problems. The respondents evaluated positively the responsible and professional approach to solving their problems as well as the staff friendliness. As many as 71.4% of the respondents were very satisfied or rather satisfied than dissatisfied with a responsible approach, 63.4% of the respondents were satisfied or more satisfied than dissatisfied with the professionalism of the staff and 73.2% of the respondents were satisfied or more satisfied than dissatisfied with the officers' helpfulness.

The respondents also evaluated whether employees gain personal benefit from working at the office or whether they would take a bribe to achieve faster problem resolution for a particular citizen. Only 8.9% of the respondents are convinced that officers have no personal benefit from their work in the office, 21.4% of them were unable to answer this question and up to 35.7% of the respondents think that the officers gain personal benefit from their work at the office.

The fact that as many as 38.4% of the respondents could not say whether the staff are able to take a bribe is interesting. Based on this evaluation, it is possible to deduce that these respondents apparently did not offer a bribe in their contact with the office's staff. A positive point is the fact that 39.3% of the respondents were persuaded to answer that definitely, and respectively rather no than yes, they were not successful with bribery. A total of 18.8% of the respondents

believe, or respectively report, that it is more likely than not that staff would take bribes for priority solving of their problem.

## 6. Results

It was shown by the research results that in the management of local self-government, the practical, professional and personal characteristics of mayors are important because they face everyday problems in the municipality and the problems of inhabitants. New trends in public administration bring the implementation of new types of management into local self-government, whether externally towards the inhabitants or internally towards the organization (officers), and are determined by managerial, personal and qualification requirements.

The election of candidates in leading managerial positions in municipalities is influenced by the interest of citizens in public affairs. It was confirmed by the survey results that this trend still persists in Slovak municipalities. Despite the fact that council meetings are public, up 63.4% of the respondents do not take part in council meetings, around 15.2% of the respondents attend these meetings irregularly and 6.3% of the respondents are involved only when their applications are dealt with. Only 8% of the respondents regularly attend the meetings of the council and it can be assumed that they are council members, committee members or the chief auditor of the municipality.

The mayors of the surveyed municipalities have different professions and education; as the main reason for their candidacy in most cases they presented the intention to change the prior management of the municipality or to improve the financial management of the municipality, build infrastructure in municipalities and improve the quality of life of the residents. Only five of the interviewed inhabitants stated that mayoral candidates had as a reason for their candidacy to use their existing knowledge from working in the public sector (either as council members, parliamentary deputies or graduates of corresponding study fields in high school).

Local self-government does not have a statutory scope for training, especially with regard to elected representatives. At present, in self-government, additional training is implemented for both elected representatives of local self-government and the staff of the municipal offices and organizations established by them. These representatives are trained on a voluntary basis in accordance with their responsibilities to the voters whom they represent.

Practical knowledge about the quality of self-government management in municipalities of different

sizes shows that the formation of the primary quality of self-government management is in municipal elections and it is differentiated according to the size of the municipality. In small towns, members of older age groups, with lower levels of education and a predominant professional profile of engineering disciplines, are elected as mayors (Belajová, 2009).

The current practice, however, raises the question of the minimum level of training for mayors in local self-government. In a number of Slovakian municipalities, the problem is arising of managing the challenges accompanying the position of mayor. Training for local self-government has the character of more or less one-day training. For mayors, special courses are offered. These are held regularly every six months and usually last for two days. There is, however, a need to reconcile the duration of the activity in the elected public function, especially for those representatives who have already been involved in self-government in the long term (i.e. more than one term).

In the conditions of Slovak local self-government, elections for the mayor and members of municipal councils are held every four years. The presented results of the questionnaire survey are part of a research project that aims to evaluate the management in the conditions of Slovak local self-government and our aim is to conduct a similar questionnaire survey in 2015 (the year after the election of the local government bodies), which will determine whether there is a change in the reasons for the choice of elected representatives from the perspective of inhabitants in comparison with 2010.

## 7. Conclusion

Since the municipal funding of municipalities is linked to the economy of the Slovak Republic, and respectively its growth (a total volume of 65.4% of revenue from personal income tax is redistributed to municipalities), it is important in view of further development to obtain detailed knowledge of the management structure, which makes decisions on a relatively large volume of financial resources. The importance of the right choice of mayor determines the overall management of municipalities.

The Slovak legislation does not condition candidates for the post of mayor by education. The municipalities of the Slovak Republic in 2012 disposed of financial resources to the amount of EUR 1 141 746 thousand, so the education level is considered as an important attribute of a prospective candidate. Some municipalities have mayors who have no primary education and they manage the funds of municipalities without any knowledge of financing, often resulting in economic problems, which can ultimately end in

receivership. In comparison with the claims for top managers in the private sector and in local self-government, there are significant differences, although there are many self-governing managers who manage with a not insignificant amount of financial resources and a large amount of communal property.

In November 2013, elections were held in higher territorial units (regional self-government), in which the citizen participation was 17.29%. Compared with the participation of inhabitants in local elections, in which the participation was 49.69%, it is far lower. This also relates to the fact that the regional self-government is not as close to the citizen as the local government and it also has its economic aspect. Residents contribute their own financial resources to the development of higher territorial units only to a limited extent (through the share of personal income tax and through motor vehicle tax), but on the municipal level it is a much larger proportion of citizens' money through local taxes and fees for municipal solid waste, which only in 2012 presented income to the total amount of EUR 1 662 668 thousand (44.5% of the total municipal revenues).

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