Participative Budgeting - Various Approaches in Slovakia

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Abstract. The concept of participatory budgeting represents restoration for public space and community life and financing of different public projects. Participatory budgeting is a new instrument included within previous political instruments that have influenced the political culture of Slovak public officials regarding decision-making processes about municipal budgets and also their level of acceptance of active citizen participation in these decision-making processes. This participative budgeting had strong impact on behaviour of citizens in certain regions and localities.

Keywords: public administration, public space, participatory budgeting

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1. Introduction

After the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and the founding of the independent Slovak Republic in 1992, democratic instruments in policy decision-making were strengthened and were legally accepted for regional policy within a new public administration. The process of political thawing went hand in hand with development of functional regional policy and its instruments, acceptance of civic space and the possibility to participate on it. One of the most important manifestations of participatory democracy is participatory budgeting. This type of budgeting in Slovakia has a different concept compared to the concept used in various countries of Latin America (especially in Brazil) or in other European countries. In Slovakia participatory budgeting has existed for about two to three years.

2. Methodology

Concept of participatory budgeting varies very much with different cases, what had happened in different countries and also with different cases what had happened in Slovakia. This concept is very much influenced by cultural and historical background and also by political aspirations of different civic associations which are behind participatory budgeting. The aim of this study is illustration of different cases of participatory budgeting what were realized in Slovakia in different towns and their different realization.

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3. Participatory Budgeting in Slovak Republic

It is necessary to understand that participatory budgeting is a new instrument included within previous political instruments that have influenced the political culture of Slovak public officials regarding decision-making processes about municipal budgets and also their level of acceptance of active citizen participation in these decision-making processes. Increased interest among citizens to more fully participate in the public arena was raised after accelerated development of municipal policy, especially in various locations over the last several years in both small villages and also in larger towns, where active citizens started organizing themselves into various community and non-profit organizations. This interest in involvement in public issues has been manifested in several cities: Banská Bystrica, Bratislava and Ružomberok.

A common thread in these three cases that has influenced the concept of participatory budgeting has been the special interest of many citizens in restoration of community life in their locales. Citizen groups have been interested in participatory budgeting as a way to support social relations among various city suburbs and city parts, which had been destroyed during the socialist era of industrialization. This interest in participatory budgeting represents desire for restoration of their community in general, for better planning so as to support adequate municipal projects, as well a dedication to local needs in their communities.

4. Case studies of Bratislava, Banská Bystrica and Ružomberok

Similar processes of participatory budgeting took place in these three municipalities. The seminal participatory budgeting began in Bratislava in 2011 as “civil budgeting”. Finances allocated for participatory budgeting were not distributed via different public grants but were and remained part of the municipal budget. Local elected officials decide how much financial support should be allocated for different projects based on what they considered the primary public interest. The allocated sum of money for public projects was (and is) less than 1 percent of the municipal budget and very often is less than 0.2%. In Bratislava, the participatory budget in 2014 for six public agendas is €46,000 (of the total €370 million city budget).

The main goal of this participatory budgeting is to support various public agendas that should be of interest for the general public. Bratislava’s participatory budget has several agendas such as for traffic and roadways, environment, culture, sport, social aid and social assistance. The primary public interest in participatory budgeting is concentrated on selection of appropriate projects from within the above-mentioned agendas.

All projects that are selected by the public must be executed according to the regulations for public procurement and a municipality’s internal budgetary regulations. This process has to be checked by the public, particularly by participatory civic forums that are expected to be very active in the process.

In Bratislava participatory budgeting was defined as civil budgeting because acceptance of participatory budgeting has been supported by citizens and activists in accord with their interest in upgrading Bratislava’s public, community space. Citizens’ different ideas about implementation of various public projects culminated in the development of a special “public stock exchange”. This public stock exchange is internet-based and its web address is advertised on Bratislava’s city council webpage. All citizens (18 years and older) can contribute their ideas and projects and can post information on the website.

The desirable aspect of this project was that this participatory budgeting involved citizens of Bratislava to participate in creating part of the city budget and to help implement interesting, new public projects and take part in the process of redistribution of public finances for various financial and public
agendas. Bratislava’s participatory budgeting underwent severe criticism in 2014 from the side of the general public, especially concerning the transparency of the decision-making processes in public forums and ignorance on the part of public officials from the municipality of Bratislava. [1]

Banská Bystrica began its experience with participatory budgeting only in 2014. The budget allocated for participatory decision-making for various public projects was set at €20,000 or 0.2% of the total city budget less than 1 percent of the municipal budget and very often is less than €48 million. Community sub-councils with the help of activists decided to implement four projects. The decision-making process here has been more transparent because the winning projects have mostly been implemented and accepted by the public.

In Ružomberok participatory budgeting implemented by activists and civic sub-councils began in 2013. This participatory budgeting was originally initiated by the civic association named Creative Development. Ružomberok’s total city budget is about €18 million and this year €4,500 has been allocated to the participatory budget for public projects.

5. Communication

Participatory experience of citizens has been supported by creating different civic and community associations that try to unify atomized public discussion and interests to develop more pronounced democratic activity on the local level. One of these activities is generating support for participatory budgeting and construction of a new type of “participatory tree” – more positive networks among different civic activists and civic associations. Public interest in more participative civic space at the local level was catapulted by municipal reforms undertaken in 2011.

This municipal reform put in the foreground the general development of communities and general well-being of inhabitants on the municipal and local level and support for subsidiarity and decentralization of public administration.[2] Consequently, this new phase of regional policy influenced the growth of new civic and community associations. On the other hand, this initial stage of increased public interest was also accompanied by a significant amount of skepticism.

6. Participating actors

The local actors in these initiatives have mostly been various civic associations that are interested in participation in budgeting and implementation of local projects. One of the most important civic associations has been Utopia that has been pushing for implementation of the participatory budgeting process in Bratislava and that has backed various participatory projects in the Slovak Republic. The primary interest of members of this civic association is solidarity and cooperation based on rational support of real, spontaneous activities.

Utopia has been interested in creating participatory communities capable of monitoring and limiting hegemony of power on a local level. The activity of this civic association was inspired by the philosophical book The Turning Point and by the political activity of Friedrich Ebert, the well-known German social-democratic politician. Utopia has suggested that one of turning points on the local level is creation of a participatory budget process with openly-accessible data as one of the possibilities of controlling hegemony of power at the local level. From this point of view, it is understandable why Utopia’s primary goals are creation of various participatory networks and participatory communities (with open access for citizens) and support for functional communication among them. The Utopia civic association has built participatory communities that supported the project of participatory budgeting in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica and Ružomberok and developed participatory communication...
among different communities. The other type of actors are those who normally gather together in participatory activities based on local interests, professions and neighborhoods and their activity often is more targeted and brings better results.

One example is student activity at the youth hostel Mlyny in Bratislava. This project of participatory budgeting has been very successful. The group has implemented several projects with the €10,000 that has been allocated to it. Another successful project in participatory budgeting has been in Bratislava’s City District II. In this city district there is a very active municipal authority supporting participatory budgeting. In 2014, €25,000 was allocated for participatory budgeting and the citizens who participated in a discussion forum suggested 18 projects for implementation. The final decision was that 11 projects will be implemented.

7. **The future of participatory budgeting**

   True functionality of participatory budgeting depends not only on active participation by citizens on the local level but also on real supportive interest on the part of municipal officials. This interaction between citizens and local elected officials and city authorities is possible because this interaction goes hand in hand with municipal reform. This municipal reform is based on support for a functioning civic space and various forms of flexible and decentralized activity for public administration in Slovakia. Support of participatory budgeting on the local political level is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, one of the possibilities to strengthen public participatory space in Slovakia.

8. **References**

