Problems of very small municipalities in the South Moravian Region perceived by their mayors

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Abstract: The Czech Republic is characterized by high fragmentation of settlements and high number of very small municipalities. The high fragmentation of municipalities in the Czech Republic has long been discussed. The debaters indicate a number of problems arising from management and sustainability of a very small municipality as well as a lack of willingness to merge the municipalities. This research deals with the problems of very small municipalities of up to 200 inhabitants in the South Moravian Region perceived by their own mayors. The mayors of selected very small municipalities are contacted and in a semi-structured interview they are asked about the problems they register in the municipality. The most interviewed mayors perceive as a problem a high unnecessary increasing administration. Problems associated with municipal management generally occur in interviews very often. Other common problems are social problems such as population decline or moving socially weak and troubled people, which occur mainly in districts distant from Brno (Hodonín and Znojmo districts).

Key Words: small municipalities, unnecessary increasing administration, municipal management, social problems, population decline

INTRODUCTION
The Czech Republic with its relatively high number of municipalities (6 258 municipalities, 2017) is characterized by a high fragmentation of the municipalities and has a different settlement structure compared to other European countries. Swianiewicz (2002) indicates that the Czech Republic has 80% of municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants, France 77%, Slovakia 68%, Spain 61%, Hungary 54%, Latvia 32%, Italy 24%, whereas 16 countries of the EU do not have such municipalities. An optimal municipal size and efficiency is the subject of several researchers (Martins 1995, Holzer et al. 2009, Zafra-Gómez and Pérez Muñiz 2010). An average population per municipality in the Czech Republic is about 1 700 inhabitants. A very small municipality in this work is defined as a municipality with less than 200 permanent residents. There are almost 1 500 municipalities (24%) of this size category in the Czech Republic (CSO 2017).

Kadeřábková and Jetmar (2010) state that the small municipalities have limited ability to ensure their further development (or to maintain their attractiveness for their inhabitants) under the current rules for the distribution of public funds. Hampl and Müller (1998) see the high fragmentation of municipalities in the Czech Republic as unsustainable, they see problem mainly in the sphere of municipal management and excessive fragmentation of financial resources. However, despite the rational arguments against fragmentation, they do not expect changes in the functioning of the municipalities in that time, they assume resistance of the municipalities themselves, even those well-functioning and wealthy. Further they add that radical reforms of the municipal systems in developed European countries have been carried out in a period of prosperity, in which they believe that the general public is more open for administrative changes.

The Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (2015) reports that for the long-term problems of small municipalities with up to 500 inhabitants there is a lack of civic amenities (school, library, post office, medical ordination, grocery and other services), almost 20% of the population of municipalities is not connected to sewerage and 10% of them are not supplied by public water supply, a lot of municipalities do not have a sewage treatment plant yet. Other problems include poor transport
infrastructure availability, lack of high-speed internet services in certain areas, or lack of job opportunities (80% of inhabitants of municipalities commute) and the threat of restrictions on business in municipalities. Žlábková (2013) also states that any development activity of small municipalities is dependent on subsidies and often the administration associated with the project in the grant application is an invincible problem for very small municipalities.

The importance of the problem of the small municipalities is also emphasized by Hampl and Müller (1998), who point to the fact that although their share in the population and thus in the economy of the state is insignificant, their share in the area of the administered territory is already quite significant. Even though only 2% of all Czechs live in the very small municipalities, they take care of 10% of the territory of the Czech Republic. These are areas that represent the natural potential of the state, therefore they emphasize the need to ensure good management of this potential.

This research focuses on these very small municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants and aims to examine their problems in terms of how their own mayors see them. The geographic focus of the research is the South Moravian Region, where very small municipalities, appear to have the highest negative demographic development according to statistical indicators such as population growth, ageing index and unemployment rate. There are a total of 107 very small municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants in this region, which are predominantly located in the districts of Blansko, Brno-Country and Znojmo (CSO 2017).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the preparatory phase of research, statistical data of these very small municipalities were evaluated, both within the whole Czech Republic and within the South Moravian Region. Statistical indicators were, in particular, population growth, ageing index and unemployment rate. These very small municipalities are located in 5 districts: Blansko (31 municipalities), Brno-Country (29 municipalities), Hodonín (4 municipalities), Vyškov (5 municipalities) and Znojmo (38 municipalities). Map of these municipalities was created (Figure 1). From these municipalities, a sample of municipalities was selected for subsequent semi-structured interviews with the mayors of these municipalities. In the districts of Hodonin and Vyškov, all municipalities were selected, due to their small number. In the districts of Blansko, Brno-Country and Znojmo, in each of them there were selected municipalities of three size categories: 1–70 inhabitants, 71–140 inhabitants, 140–200 inhabitants, so that from each size category one municipality was selected in which the statistical data appears to be “prosperous” (high population growth, low ageing index, low unemployment rate) and one municipality that appears to be a “lagging behind” (high population decline, high ageing index, high unemployment rate).

These communes were subsequently contacted by mail. There are 9% of mayors of the municipalities responded to the mail. Those mayors who did not respond to the mail were then contacted by phone. 70% of the respondents responded positively to the telephone offer of interview. Then, the meeting with the mayors followed and a semi-structured interview about the problems that they record as the mayors. The conversations were recorded on the dictaphone, in case of a disagreement with the recording, the responses were written. Six mayors were visited directly in the municipality during office hours at a municipal office without a pre-arranged meeting. In the case of a dissatisfaction with the mayor’s interview or impossibility of contacting the mayor (the telephone is not welcome – 10%, he is not present at the municipal office during office hours), another representative municipality with similar statistical data was subsequently selected in the districts of Blansko, Brno-Country and Znojmo. So far, 17 municipalities have been visited, another 4 mayors answered about the problems by telephone and one responded about the problems in mail. The project is still ongoing.

Research is focused on the qualitative detection of the problems of the very small municipalities, but the answers of the mayors have often been aggregated, so a chart of the most frequent answers was created based on the geographical location (district), where the very small municipality is situated.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most common problem perceived by the mayors of the very small municipalities is unnecessary increasing administration, in which 10 out of 22 interviewed mayors agreed (see Figure 2). This problem occurs almost in all districts. In the district of Znojmo, none of the mayor of very small municipality mentioned increasing administration as a problem. When they were asked about this, some said they were already accustomed to increasing administration habits, and did not see this as a potential improvement. However, this problem is not likely to be seen only by the mayors of the very small municipalities, but it is quite possible that even the mayors of larger municipalities can perceive this as a problem. It is also important to point out that mayors who see the increasing administration as a problem agree (without asking the interviewer) that this administration is often unnecessary, irrational or illogical. The number of questionnaires that the mayor has been approached in recent years is, according to them, often irrelevant, and does not have any other practical significance, as well as the unnecessary administration often waste precious time of mayors of these very small municipalities who perform their duties outside their employment.

The most recurring problems were imminent repair of road communication as an economic burden on the municipality's budget, inability to get capable people into the municipality leadership as a problem in the very small municipalities of various districts of the South Moravian Region and permanent decrease of the population perceived as a problem mainly by mayors of the very small municipalities in the district of Hodonín. The problem of recurring elections to municipal councils, especially in small municipalities, is already dealt with by Hampl and Müller (1998).

These individual problems, described by the mayors of the very small municipalities, are then grouped into five main domains: operational, municipal management, natural, social and building problems (see Figure 3). The most represented are the management problems, mainly due to the frequency of the answer of unnecessary increasing administration as a problem. Another major problem domain is the social area of the very small municipalities, the mayors are facing problems such as population decline, socially weak and problematic people, disputes between residents, aging,
few children under 15, unemployment, non-adaptive immigrants or people who are not engaged in cultural events.

Figure 2 Problems of very small municipalities in South Moravian Region perceived by their mayors. Source: own research

Another major problem domains are operational problems such as missing sewage and sewage treatment plant, economy of water supply and sewage, missing grocery store or problems with the transport - the duty of maintenance of roads or problems from noise from frequented roads.

Figure 3 Domains of problems of very small municipalities in South Moravian Region perceived by their mayors. Source: own research

From the geographical point of view, it is possible to notice the differences in the problems seen by the mayors of the very small municipalities between the districts in the vicinity of Brno (districts Blansko and Brno-Country) and districts distant from Brno (districts Hodonín and Znojmo). While building problems, such as the pressure of developers to building or lack of building land, are rather the domains of the suburbanization areas of Brno, while social problems such as population decline, socially weak and troubled people, disputes between residents, high age average, few children under 15, unemployment, are rather the domains of areas more distant from the city of Brno, although the
social problems associated with the problematic inclusion of the population of suburban areas such as non-adaptive immigrants and people not involved in cultural events also occur in areas in the vicinity of Brno. The results confirm the overall persistence of peripheral areas (Musil and Müller 2008, Novotná 2005) and the problem of suburbanization, as perceived by more mayors of municipalities (Vaishar 2013).

Although in most of these very small municipalities there is almost no civic amenities (school, library, post office, medical practice, grocery store), only one mayor perceives missing of the grocery store as a problem. Similarly, although in many of the visited municipalities there is no sewage and sewage treatment plant, only 3 mayors see missing sewage as a problem. However, problems with water supply, when they occur, are often much more serious than missing sewage.

Although Žlábková (2013) states that the administration linked to the project in the grant application is an invincible problem for the very small municipalities, none of the interviewed mayors identified this as a problem.

CONCLUSION

The high fragmentation of the municipalities in the Czech Republic has been discussed since its inception in 1990. Experts indicate a number of problems arising from management and sustainability of a very small municipality as well as a lack of willingness to merge municipalities (Hampl and Müller 1998, Matějová et al. 2016, Schnaubert 2016). The aim of this research was to find out what problems of the very small municipalities in the South Moravian Region are perceived by their own mayors. The most interviewed mayors perceive as a problem a high unnecessary increasing administration. Problems associated with municipal management generally occur in interviews very often. Other common problems are social problems such as population decline or moving socially weak and troubled people, which occur mainly in districts distant from Brno (Hodonín and Znojmo districts), which confirms the overall persistent problem of peripheral areas.

It would be interesting to select problems perceived by mayors, which depend on the size of the settlement from those which are connected with the independence of the small municipality. If the village is not independent, the most frequent problems (an overwhelming administration, difficult municipal management, limited number of people able to work in the municipal council) will not exist for it. Problems with missing social infrastructure (shops, schools etc.), or social problems depend on the settlement size regardless the administrative dependency or independency and they would exist in any case. On the other side, problems of technical infrastructure like maintenance of roads or sewage systems would be solved easier within the larger administrative unit.

However, although it may seem that the disadvantages of independence predominate, the mayors of the very small municipalities are not willing to merge municipalities. In the overwhelming cases, they like to make their own decisions about what will happen in the village and leave no decision to anyone in another municipality. The advantage of the independence of the very small municipalities is seen also in the fact that these municipalities create quasi small social group, where the people are familiar with each other and communicate directly. Often the representatives of most families of the very small municipality regularly meet at a municipal council meeting and are arguing about the situation in the village, so the own council is an element of social sustainability of the very small municipality. Also bigger social control can play its role there.

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REFERENCES


