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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL POLITICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Oto Potluka, Judit Kalman, Ida Musiałkowska and Piotr Idczak

Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, fundamental changes have occurred in the Visegrad countries. These changes have had a clear impact on the democratic development of these societies. In particular, these changes have affected both the process of shaping local governance and the role of civil society.

Civil society and civic engagement have become vibrant and essential factors for preserving democracy. Before the 1990s, civil society in the Visegrad countries manifested as various forms of anti-state opposition. Civil society was seen as a key factor in bottom-up initiatives against totalitarian regimes. Since the beginning of this systemic transformation, membership in democratic parties reflected increasing democratic development. Later, the political decision-making process became detached from civil society. Although the political parties became more professionalised, they also became brokers between civil society and the state. This had the effect of diminishing civil society’s participation in political processes (Katz and Mair 1995).

The distortion and suppression of characteristic civil-society attitudes and values under previous regimes resulted in deficient civic engagement. Restrictive rules relating to freedom of association and participation in public matters during the communist period eroded the foundations of a viable civil society (Petrova 2007). The legacy was a high level of social distrust, a perception of the state as a force hostile to society, and the elimination of traditions and patterns of civil society (Adam et al. 2005; Paldam and Svendsen 2001). Therefore, it was not easy for civil society to regain its lost position, improve new democratic structures, and contribute to transparency. The persistence of the dominating role of public authorities and central governments in political representation has been disillusioning for many civil-society organisations (Potluka and Liddle 2014). This is particularly important at the local level, where civil society helps to deepen and sustain democratic local governance. Moreover, it strengthens social participation in political decision-making and enhances the local political system’s credibility by promoting transparency and accountability. Nevertheless, according to recent studies (Potluka and Liddle 2014), partnership is reasonably strong at the local level. However, this is not the case for all Central European countries. The data at the local level show that even if local civil-society organisations have higher acceptance levels with respect to local political decision-making, this is not generally the rule (Potluka 2009; Potluka and Liddle 2014).
In longer-established European states, civil society and public authorities exist as two inherent elements of the social system. When considering the Visegrad countries’ historical experience and consequences of the systemic transformation, it is therefore important to consider the current state of civil society in those countries. Civil society highlights issues of importance for incentives and actions undertaken by local communities. It is composed of committed citizens who share common interests and responsibility for the common good (Calhoun 2011; Laine 2014). This reasoning is relevant because it provides an overview of how civil society engagement affects local politics and shapes its performance to focus on the common good.

The chapter discusses the development and current structure of local political systems in the Visegrad countries. The primary focus is on the role of the local political system, social capital, civic engagement and civil society organisations (CSOs: defined as trade unions, professional associations, civic associations, religious organisations, foundations, endowment funds, and public benefit corporations) in political decision-making.

**Political and regional structure of the Visegrad countries**

Since 1989, changes in the legal framework regarding decentralisation and the delegation of competencies to the regional and local levels have been introduced in all of the Visegrad countries. While preparing for EU membership, these countries had to bring into force a common Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistic (NUTS) (see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/overview) which subdivided their territory into regions at three different levels (NUTS 1, 2 and 3 respectively, ranging from bigger to smaller territorial units). A system of local administrative units (LAU) was also introduced. It is a component of the NUTS system and corresponds to the level of counties/micro-regions (LAU 1) and the level of municipalities or equivalent units (LAU 2). Not all NUTS areas have administrative and political self-governing bodies (see Table 23.1). However, competencies were delegated at the regional and local levels and to the local authorities of the lowest level (municipalities – LAU 2) to provide public services and perform tasks in the areas of education, social and health services, and basic infrastructure (water, sewage, solid waste, road maintenance, lighting, etc.). During the transition period, the decentralisation process seemed successful. In some countries, however, especially after the crisis of 2008, further evolution of the functioning of local entities was seen as reversing prior achievements (see Hungary below for example).

**The Czech system**

Local elections occur every four years (Act No. 491/2001 Coll. of the Czech Republic on Elections to Municipal Councils) according to the governance system in the Czech Republic (The Czech National Council’s law 367/1990 on municipal statutes and Act No. 128/2000 Coll. of the Czech Republic on Municipalities). The Czech local election system at the municipal level enables local governments to decide (within the legal framework) on the size of their assembly for the following election period. Local governments may also divide city districts into several election districts. Political parties that have received a higher share of votes get better results as the election apply the d’Hondt system of calculating votes into seats.

The elected municipal assembly is responsible for electing the mayor. Mayors must be elected members of the assembly. Similarly, the regional assemblies are responsible for electing regional presidents. This system differentiates the Czech Republic from other Visegrad countries, in which mayors are elected directly.
Table 23.1 Characteristics of administrative division and election systems at the local level in the Visegrad countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Poland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>self-governed</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>self-governed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTS 1 (macroregion)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTS 2 (region)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTS 3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU 1</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU 2 (municipality)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election system at the</td>
<td>6,253</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2,927</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal level</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
<td>Proportional, plurality</td>
<td>for mayoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
<td>for mayoral elections</td>
<td>elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proportional, plurality</td>
<td>Proportional, plurality</td>
<td>Proportional, plurality</td>
<td>Proportional, plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for mayoral elections</td>
<td>for mayoral elections</td>
<td>for mayoral elections</td>
<td>for mayoral elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term of elected municipal</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authorities (LAU 2 level)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected bodies at the</td>
<td>Municipal councils; district councils</td>
<td>Mayors; municipal councils; district councils including district mayors</td>
<td>Mayor and city government(s) directly elected; district local councils + city council and mayor general (in the capital city)</td>
<td>Mayor; municipal council; district local councils + city council and mayor general (in the capital city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal level</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout in 2014 municipal elections (in %)</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country population (million)</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Eurostat (2016b) (rows (1)–(5)), National election commissions of the Visegrad countries (rows (6)–(9)), Eurostat (2016a) (row (10))

Self-governed: Regions or municipalities governed by an elected assembly. In the annex, we translate the territorial classifications from the national language; NUTS: Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics; LAU: Local administrative unit.
The 2014 local elections show both that established political parties (and political movements) lost ground and that the electorate is moving towards independent candidates and new political movements. It would be risky for incumbent politicians to establish a system that is advantageous for election parties with a high share of the votes in such a situation because it is unclear who will win.

The Slovak system

The municipal governance and municipal election systems are different in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, although both countries had a long common history in Czechoslovakia. In Slovakia, municipal governance is established by Act no. 369/1990 Coll. of the Slovak Republic: the Act on Municipal Administration. Municipal elections are regulated by the Act of the Slovak National Council no. 346/1990. City districts can be further divided into smaller electoral districts. In each electoral district, up to 12 council members can be elected depending on the proportion of the population living in that area. The individual candidates with the highest number of votes win the seats and become council members.

Additionally, as part of the municipal elections, citizens of large cities elect a city mayor, members of the city council, a local mayor, and the local council. Unlike local council ballots, for city council ballots, the city districts correspond to electoral districts as required by Article 9(2) of the Act of the Slovak National Council. 346/1990 Coll. on elections to municipal bodies, as amended.

The Hungarian system

Until the early 2000s Hungary was widely considered a successful case of decentralisation, having made great progress on legal, institutional, regulatory and financial frameworks that enabled truly local decisions (Soós and Kálmán 2002). The new system of fully autonomous, elected local governments established by Act LXV of 1990 on Local Governments was considered a major cornerstone of democracy, counterbalancing any authoritarian central government and effectively representing local interests. Until recently, municipalities have had very broad responsibilities for service provision, similar to Nordic countries’ much larger local governments. Localities enjoyed autonomy in their spending preferences related to these responsibilities, although they were constrained in specific service standards by various sectoral laws. This in effect constrained some aspects of local governments’ decisions and performance. Since 1990, the Hungarian system of local elections has involved a compromise between ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ politics. In settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, a plurality formula with a block vote system was used. Larger localities used a mixed formula with compensatory lists. The plurality block vote system helps to select individual candidates, and the compensatory lists ‘let in’ national political actors at the local level (Kákai 2004) because the list system forces politicians to establish organisations to compete in elections (Dobos 2014). Approximately 60–80% of elected representatives and mayors run as independent candidates in the under-the-limit municipalities, whereas only a few (approximately 8–10%) independent candidates run in the larger cities (Pálné Kovács 2008). The separation of ‘locality’ and ‘national party politics’ clearly determines local governments’ political profiles (Swianiewicz and Mielczarek 2005). Thus, national parties focused on organisation building at the local levels, especially in larger cities (Soós and Kálmán 2002; Soós 2005). Bottom-up political representation of local civil-society organisations was also present, in part because of the lack of any regional or local parties. Recent public administration reform and changes in the local electoral system give local governments less room to manoeuvre and facilitate re-centralisation tendencies.
The Polish system

In 1990, a new law on Polish local self-government was introduced that provided local authorities with the power to ensure local development conditions (Act on Local Self-government 1990 of 8 March 1990, Dz. U. 1990 no. 16 item 95).

In Poland, local, regional and national elections are held every four years. Poland’s first democratic local elections occurred on 27 May 1990. According to Polish law, municipalities that do not enjoy the rights of a county have used the plurality voting system since 2014, whereas in cities that enjoy the rights of a county (and in the counties and voivodships/regions), the d’Hondt proportional election system has been applied (Act on 5 January 2011 – Election code, Dz. U. z 2011 r. No 21, item 112).

The citizens elect members of the councils of municipalities, counties, and regions. Since 2002, they have also elected representatives of the municipalities, such as presidents (in larger cities)/mayors of the cities and chiefs of non-urban municipalities. In the capital city, there are also district council elections.

Current development and dynamics at the local level in the Visegrad countries

In the Czech Republic, a shift from established political parties to local initiatives and movements characterises recent developments in local politics. In 2010, 43.0% of candidates were from parliamentary political parties. Among the candidates elected, the share of members of these political parties was 30.4%. In 2014, the situation changed: only 35.3% of candidates and only 23.5% of those elected were from parliamentary political parties. A similar development is evident in Slovakia. On the one hand, this development is a sign of democratic decision-making. On the other hand, this development demonstrates a crisis in a political system based on political parties. Moreover, the development is causing some political disconnection at the local, regional and national levels.

In Hungary, a major reorganisation of the territorial governance system has been carried out since 2010. First, the local electoral system was changed (Act LXV of 2010) between the national and local elections in 2010, mostly away from proportional representation and towards a majority system. While this was occurring, the requirements for participating in proportional elections (by establishing a party list in the bigger municipalities and regional/capital elections) became more difficult to meet.

The reform, which was introduced together with major changes in public administration, came into effect in three phases. First, county government became responsible for maintaining certain institutions, with newly established, deconcentrated government offices at the county level legal supervision rights over municipalities and changing the rules of asset management (from January 2012) to constrain the ability of local governments (LGs) to become indebted. Second, LGs’ financing and tasks changed significantly beginning in January 2013, when the formerly local government task of providing public education and health care was shifted back to state administrative organisations financed from the national budget. At that time, it was also observed that LGs’ autonomy in providing social services was decreased. Third, the incompatibility of national and local political positions was announced (from October 2014). One possible conclusion is that local governments overall have become less significant actors, and their leadership has been assumed by national party politics. This trend reverses the decentralisation process that was in place in the period after the 1989 transition.
Current political changes in Poland have not substantially affected regional and local politics. In the 2014 local election, the majority of elected candidates came from established parties. New politicians (either independent or from the city movements) also entered Poland’s local (urban) councils (PKW 2016). The next elections are planned for 2018, and it can be expected that reactions to the changes observed at the national level will be expressed in citizens’ political preferences. Moreover, there has been discussion about changes to the election code. One of the main challenges regarding the provision of public services by Polish self-governments involves budgeting; for example, the planned reform of education and the elimination of one level of the post-primary schools will generate additional costs at the local level.

With regard to CSOs, no major legal changes have been introduced. However, there are plans to legitimise the centralised system of supervising and granting subventions to CSOs within the National Centre for Civil Society. This idea has been strongly criticised by both CSOs themselves and the Polish ombudsman, who argues that the creation of such a body contradicts the idea that the roots of civil society are found at the bottom (Bodnar 2016).

**Development of civic engagement and opinions about the likelihood of influencing policies**

Knowledge of people’s actual needs is a crucial aspect for the successful long-term design and implementation of any public policy. If this aspect is neglected, problems with local ownership of programmes and projects will hamper the sustainability of projects and programmes as well as perceptions of the policy itself. The limitations of a centralised top-down approach without knowledge of local needs are an important issue (EC 2004). Thus, civic engagement helps to increase awareness of needs at all levels of policy-making.

Citizens engage in local political decision-making not only through elections and direct participation but also through indirect participation in civil-society organisations. These three methods differ in their tools and approaches.

**Direct political participation in elections**

Civic engagement is seen as a crucial issue for established democracies. Therefore, the literature on political participation argues that this concept is one form of action through which citizens seek to influence social or political outcomes (Brady 1999). Political participation refers to citizens’ attempts to influence public representatives’ decisions that concern societal and economic issues (Adler and Goggin 2005; Berger 2009; Brady 1999; van Deth et al. 2007; Parry et al. 1992). In this sense, voting turnout has been described as the most commonly used measure of citizen participation. Voting is the principal way that people make their voices heard in the political system.

The selection of options by voting is a principle of democracy. Although this right is guaranteed, there is a question about how people apply it. All four Visegrad countries have witnessed scepticism about the influence of voting at all levels. Electoral participation is below the EU average (OECD 2016). In comparison, some countries have voting mandatory voting (Belgium and Luxemburg) which ensures high levels of turnout; other countries (Malta and Italy) habitually have high voter turnout. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference, as estimated by a sample of 155 regions in 15 Western European countries and 42 regions in six Central and Eastern European countries (see Figure 23.1). On average, the gap in regional turnout between the groups of investigated countries is 18.6%.
The difference in the level of electoral participation is often described as the legacy of communism in Central and Eastern European countries. Citizens of Western European countries generally have had more, and longer, experience in civic participation and political engagement. Consequently, they have more opportunities to express their desires and views (Coffé and van der Lippe 2010). In established and stable democracies, voting norms are supported by internalised feelings of guilt, shame or even fear of external judgements by friends, family or community members (Bolzendahl and Coffé 2013). In turn, citizens in newer democracies have had to confront democratic transition and learn civic attitudes. Thus, norms about not only voting rights and opportunities but also expressing one’s opinion in general influence political participation, but only weakly (Armingeon 2007). Moreover, voters in Central and Eastern European countries see regional elections as less important than national or local elections.

Not only is participation in general elections lower in regions in Central and Eastern European countries, but there are also differences within this group of countries (see Figure 23.1 for regional maximum, minimum and average). The Czech Republic and Hungary have generally higher participation, although some Czech regions have low participation. Polish and Slovak regions are the opposite. In post-transition countries, political interest does not correlate with participation (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). This means that although people may be interested in political life, that interest is expressed by means other than voting. This practice reflects activism without participation. Moreover, citizens in Central and Eastern Europe are more sceptical about democracy and more dissatisfied with democratic performance (18% and 62%, respectively, compared to 6% and 33% in Western Europe) (Karp and Milazzo 2015). On the one hand, scepticism about democracy may discourage citizens from participating in elections; on the other hand, people who are unsatisfied with the results of democracy may withdraw from political participation (Karp and Milazzo 2015).
Direct participation – individual engagement

Civil society is strongly based on the value of trust. This is in line with not only social capital and its essential components, such as interpersonal trust, but also citizens’ trust in public institutions (Putnam 2008). Fukuyama (1997, 1999) suggests that social capital means people’s ability that results from the prevalence of trust within society to ensure the respect of instantiated norms that lead to cooperation in groups. In turn, those norms relate to traditional advantages such as honesty, honouring commitments, reliably performing one’s duties, and reciprocity. In practical terms, this means that trust is the willingness to permit the decisions of others to influence society’s welfare (Sobel 2002). In this sense, social activity stimulates the development of civil society structures that choose local elites and leaders from within. Furthermore, the development of civil society leads to the identification of individuals who possess the collectivity, internalisation of the common good and social, economic and political empowerment that result in the intensification of both social and individual actions (Durkheim 1999).

Trust in other people is much lower in the Visegrad countries than in other EU member states. According to the European Social Survey (ESS Round 7: European Social Survey Round 7 Data 2014), in terms of general trust, all four Visegrad countries occupy the last places among the European countries covered in the survey (see Figure 23.2). In 2014, the responses in Visegrad countries to the statement ‘Most people can be trusted’ varied from 20.8% agreement in the Czech Republic to 18.3% in Slovakia, 18.2% in Hungary and 16.4% in Poland. This means that the average level of trust in those countries (18.4%) was more than three times lower than in Denmark, Norway and Finland (which averaged 65.7% agreement). Despite a noticeable increase in interpersonal trust during the analysed period, a large portion of society expressed uncertainty about dealing with other people.

The figure also shows that Poland, which achieved the highest increase in the level of trust during the past decade, takes last place in this respect among all Visegrad countries. The reasons for this result are historical and relate to Poland’s past experiences. Poland’s partitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its experience of World War II and the imposition of a communist regime created a negative image of authorities. Current attitudes reflect a negative perception of the government, institutions, political rules and regulations and principles of social life (Lewicka-Strzalecka 2007).

Although there are many reasons for this phenomenon in the Visegrad countries, the most relevant reason is primarily derived from the systemic transformation, particularly in the Czech Republic and Poland (Bartkowski and Jasińska Kania 2004; Hausner 2014; Fidrmuc and Gërxhani 2008; Czapieński and Panek 2015). Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution was a relatively quiet upheaval without large revolutionary actions and crises. After its dissolution into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, an important role in the systemic transformation of both countries was played by local democratisation (i.e., the new local councils, local political parties and grassroots organisations) and by specific traditions of self-help rooted in the culture (Bartkowski and Jasińska Kania 2004). It seems that the Czech and Slovak structures of civil society could have begun to develop very early. However, because of a low societal mood caused by a considerable economic decline and unmet expectations, this did not occur (Cisař 2013).

In Poland and Hungary, the transformation programme was based on the ‘shock therapy’ approach. Negative socio-economic effects quickly appeared. These effects included the following: a rapid rise in unemployment and social inequality, the destabilisation of governments, the rapid implementation of institutional reforms that were not always properly prepared and introduced and a decrease in the economic growth rate. This led to dissatisfaction with democracy.
and political elites (Nový 2014; Bartkowski and Jasińska Kania 2004). In addition, it should be stressed that both countries’ cultural traditions feature strong family ties, especially in Poland. Trust is limited to immediate family members and employees of family-run businesses. These attributes hinder citizens from increasing trust in themselves and their level of social capital because these feelings are deeply rooted in society and are difficult to overcome in the short term. As a result, the lack of trust in other people negatively affects or complicates the development of civil participation and activity. This seems particularly true if one considers the other feature of social capital – people’s ability to cooperate in the form of an informal or formal partnerships and a simple willingness to help other people. Results show that only 17.1% of the Visegrad population fully agreed with the opinion, ‘People mostly try to be helpful’. The more formal people’s activities are for the benefit of the others, the less different the findings are from the general view of social capital in Visegrad countries. This is expressed by people’s willingness to be involved in improving and preventing deterioration in society. The data demonstrate that only 4.8% of respondents answered ‘yes’ to the question, ‘Have you worked in an organisation or association last 12 months’ on their own initiative to improve/prevent something. These results show that people in Visegrad countries are unwilling to initiate or join activities for the benefit of their own community. Moreover, interesting insights arise from analysis of the interdependence between the above-mentioned aspects. As shown in Figure 23.3, one common feature of the Visegrad population is a low level of trust and a small number of people willing to help others and work in their community. This is confirmed by this population’s distant rankings compared to other European countries, particularly in Scandinavia.

The low level of trust and willingness to act together are closely related to the low level of general civic engagement expressed by both involvement in organisations and electoral participations. The literature on social capital suggests that a higher level of citizen trust leads to stronger social and political involvement (Coffe and van der Lippe 2010). Therefore, citizens

![Figure 23.2 Percentage of people trusting others in Europe (age 16+)](image-url)

*Results were calculated as a cumulative value of percentage of answers from 7 to 10 on the following scale: 0 (‘You can’t be too careful in dealing with people’) to 10 (‘Most people can be trusted’).*

*Source:* Adapted from ESS Round 2: European Social Survey Round 2 Data (2004); ESS Round 7: European Social Survey Round 7 Data (2014), for Slovakia; ESS Round 6: European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012)
who display a very low level of trust in either themselves or their national institutions are less likely to vote or engage in civic activities. Howard and Gilbert (2008) argue that active citizens are more likely to be trusting than inactive people are. They have found that the share of inactive people is the highest in Eastern Europe (nearly 70% according to their civic involvement index) and is more than double that of Western Europe. Although an authoritarian history has a strong negative effect on civic involvement levels in newer democracies (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014), low income levels, a lack of good governance and high levels of corruption can also strongly affect participation (Tavits 2008; Neundorf 2010). As Hooghe and Quintelier (2014) argue, the timing of the democratic transition can shape the political system’s capacity to provide good governance, but it does not directly affect citizens’ attitudes and participatory habits.

**Indirect participation through civil society organisations**

Public perceptions of the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) differ across the EU countries. Studies are inconclusive regarding the role of civil society agents’ participation in political decision-making. Some see this approach as beneficial because of better-targeted policies that bring new knowledge and skills to political processes, shared knowledge among involved actors, transparent decision-making, and the efficient use of public resources (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998; Leonardi 2006; Bache 2010). However, other studies note the risks of involving
lobbying groups, including CSOs, the low skills of stakeholders outside the political mechanism, the destabilisation of existing systems through obstruction, and low accountability (Scharpf 2007; Geissel 2009; Peters and Pierre 2004).

According to 41% of European citizens, CSOs are unnecessary (EC 2013). However, this result is influenced by responses from five Member States – Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal and Cyprus – in which a majority of the population tends to reject the role of CSOs in political decision-making. It is important for our study that the respondents in Visegrad countries view CSOs as a necessary element in society (higher frequency of responses supporting the role), although these countries are spread around the average (CZ and HU above and SK with PL below the EU-27 average).

At the local level, Slovakia and Hungary provided the lowest rate of agreement to the statement that CSOs can influence policies at local level within the EU (for details and comparison with other Visegrad countries, see Table 23.2). The Czechs do not believe that CSOs are capable of influencing policy at the national or EU level, only at the local level. Of all the EU countries, the CSOs in the Czech Republic have the lowest perceived ability to change public policies (EC 2012).

The causes of this situation are CSOs’ low financial and advocacy capacities (Frič 2004; Rose-Ackerman 2007) and general post-communism mistrust of organisations, the persistence of friendship networks, and post-communist disappointment with political development (Howard 2011). Moreover, the Czech Republic experienced a long-term dispute about the role of the civil society in public life (Potůček 1999).

The importance of CSOs as partners for the public sector is illustrated by the fact that 6% of EU citizens see membership in or support of a CSO as a method of influencing the political decision-making process (EC 2012). Only 12% of EU citizens perceive joining a political party as a means of influencing policies, although the only purpose of a political party is participation in political decision-making. Moreover, respondents see these two segments as having an equal influence on decision-makers in Hungary (9%), and Poland (7%) (EC 2012). This finding underlines the importance of CSOs’ role in political decision-making.

**Advocacy by CSOs**

CSOs need financial and personnel capacities to fulfil their advocacy role. Professionalised non-profit organisations have sufficient skills and funding to be successful in their advocacy activities. Increasing employment follows their professionalism (Frič 2015). They establish a relationship

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**Table 23.2** Opinions about the likelihood of influencing political decision-making in Central Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSOs are capable of influencing political decisions at the:</th>
<th>An effective method of influencing political decisions is:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting in local/regional elections</td>
<td>Voting in national elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local and regional level</td>
<td>National level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CZ</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HU</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU27</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All values are % of responses.

Source: Adapted from EC (2013)
with the public sector, to which they deliver public services, and they increase their transparency and credibility to obtain funding from benefactors. However, professionalisation means engaging in managerial decision-making and may result in less internal democracy and civic participation together with a decreasing advocacy role. In the extreme case, professionalisation can lead to the application of purely managerial approaches without advocacy. Moreover, a civil society sector with few financially sustainable organisations increases the risk of sudden changes and diminishes the long-term viability of the entire sector.

The EC (2013) study notes that Czech citizens do not see CSOs as effective political agents and that only 47% of Czechs share the values or interests of some CSOs and trust that CSOs influence political decision-making appropriately. Slovakia (51%) reports a slightly higher level of shared values with CSOs. Poland (62%) and Hungary (67%) are positioned above the EU-27 average (59%) (EC 2013). The Czech position is the lowest among the EU member states, a position shared by Spain and Estonia.

Moreover, the Czech Republic and Latvia are the only two countries where membership in a CSO is perceived as an ineffective way to influence political life, with a share of agreement at 52% and 54%, respectively (EC 2013).

The long-term development of the advocacy role of civil-society organisations is decreasing in the Visegrad countries. The Slovak and Hungarian cases show an especially decreasing trend in recent decades (note the scores in Figure 23.4). Poland is the only case of a visible positive trend throughout the observed period.

In 1999, Hungarian CSOs participated in regional debates before the passage of comprehensive CSO legislation. The ineffective centralised model persisted in CSOs. Thus, CSOs’ identification of their target groups’ needs was very weak and primarily based on a top-down approach (USAID 2015).

![Figure 23.4](chart.png)

**Figure 23.4** Development of advocacy capacity of CSOs in the Visegrad countries


*Source: Adapted from USAID (2015), calculations of the authors*
Conclusions

This chapter considers the various factors that determine civic engagement through electoral participation and the role and position of civil society in the Visegrad countries. It describes the development and current structure of local political systems along with certain inherent difficulties and features. After 1989, all four countries introduced fundamental changes that shaped their democratic and economic transition, including new institutions such as a legal and financial framework for decentralisation and the delegation of competencies to the regional and local levels, along with strengthening their civil society.

Before joining the EU, the Visegrad countries reshaped their territorial governance system and introduced administrative units at the regional and local levels. This was in line with the basic idea of the effectiveness of decentralisation: the best knowledge of local needs and preferences leads to the successful design and implementation of public policies. During the transition period, the decentralisation process seemed successful. In some countries, however, the reversal of prior achievements and re-centralisation is observable through recent reforms in territorial administration and changes in the scope of municipalities’ power (Hungary), especially after the 2008 crisis and fiscal austerity. These changes are consistent with recent political ideologies and a contested neoliberal democratic vision of development.

Citizens can engage in local political decision-making not only through elections and direct participation but also through indirect participation in civil-society organisations. In all of the Visegrad countries, citizens participate in the direct elections of local assemblies and mayors (although not the latter in the Czech Republic), and there is usually a high share of independent candidates. Elections are held every four years. Election systems are proportional in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and mixed in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (mayoral elections). However, all Visegrad countries experienced lower than the EU average and declining voter turnout rates, especially in regional or local elections. There are differences within this group. The Czech Republic and Hungary have generally higher participation, whereas Polish and Slovak regions are lower. The lower and declining turnout rates in these post-communist countries are attributed to institutional, political and economic aspects.

The picture is more discouraging for indirect forms of civic participation. The civil sector remains fairly weak, and low participation rates in civil-society organisations are visible in the Visegrad countries compared to their Western European counterparts. The reason for this situation lies in social norms and trust. One general feature of the Visegrad countries is a low level of trust, confirmed by their last places compared to other European countries, especially Scandinavia. The average level of trust in the Visegrad countries amounted to 18.4% in 2014, whereas for all European countries it stood at approximately 33.8% (ESS Round 7: European Social Survey Round 7 Data 2014). Poland, despite a regular growth in trust since 2004, was ranked last among the Visegrad countries.

In addition to low general trust, there is a high level of uncertainty and untrustworthiness in these countries with respect to dealing with other people along with a passive attitude and low willingness to help others or act for their communities. Some of these features are a legacy of the communist past, whereas others are attributable to the negative socioeconomic consequences of the transition process and disillusionment with democratic development. As a result, the development of civil participation and activity seems much slower and more difficult. Activity in civil-society organisations remains significantly lower than in Southern European countries with similarly low levels of trust (Portugal, Spain).
Respondents in Visegrad countries view CSOs as a needed element in society, although they view membership in them as an ineffective form of participation and seem to attach more value to voting in elections despite demonstrating low actual turnout rates. Visegrad respondents perceive CSOs to be weaker than Western European respondents do. CSOs are considered capable of exerting some influence on local- and regional-level politics in all Visegrad countries (although HU and SK are the lowest in the EU in this respect), but less at the national level (CZ and HU) and especially at the EU level (CZ). Czech citizens do not consider CSOs effective political agents; only 47% of Czechs share the civic values or interests of some CSOs. These figures are slightly higher and comparable to EU averages in the other three Visegrad countries.

The advocacy capacity of CSOs within the Visegrad countries seems to have been fairly stable throughout the past fifteen years, showing a strong relationship with those countries’ financial capacities. Instead of any improvement, however, a decrease is visible in the overall index measuring the advocacy capacities of Hungarian and Slovak CSOs, with Poland showing a somewhat positive trend. The factors that contribute to these decreasing capacities and other measurement tools that would better demonstrate the nuanced details of CSO capacities remain to be explained by future research.

Much research has been conducted on the transition experience of Central and Eastern European countries, especially on the institutional, political and economic aspects at the national level. Less research has focused on the local or regional levels and on civic engagement or civil-sector development. This chapter has highlighted only certain details with regard to these issues in the Visegrad countries. However, local-level data generation, the measurement of civil society’s capacities and strength and, especially, tracking progress across time remain important tasks for future research as the Visegrad countries travel further down the path towards democratic and open local governance.

References
Act No 128/2000 Coll. of the Czech Republic, on Municipalities (the Municipal Order).
Act No. 369/1990 Coll. of the Slovak Republic, the Act on Municipal Administration.
Act No. 491/2001 Coll. of the Czech Republic, on Elections to Municipal Councils.
Act on 5 January 2011 – Election code, Dz. U. z 2011 r., no. 21, item 112.


Appendix 1

Glossary of acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>civil society organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CZ</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HU</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU</td>
<td>local administrative unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LG</td>
<td>local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTS</td>
<td>Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Poland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>The US Government agency that works to end extreme global poverty and enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2

Translation of territorial classification in national languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Poland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NUTS 2</td>
<td>region soudežnosti</td>
<td>oblast</td>
<td>régió</td>
<td>województwo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTS 3</td>
<td>kraj</td>
<td>kraj</td>
<td>megye</td>
<td>podregion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU 1</td>
<td>okres</td>
<td>okres</td>
<td>járás</td>
<td>powiat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU 2</td>
<td>obec</td>
<td>obec</td>
<td>helyi önkormányzat</td>
<td>gmina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>