





The Socio-Cultural Capital  
of Successful Villages



Daniel Luther

# THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CAPITAL OF SUCCESSFUL VILLAGES

The Villages of the Year in Slovakia



Institute of Ethnology  
and Social Anthropology  
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# **SOCIO-CULTURAL CAPITAL OF SUCCESSFUL MUNICIPALITIES IN SLOVAKIA**

**Daniel Luther**

## **Foreword**

This publication is dedicated mainly to experts and people interested in issues concerning life in the countryside that can be a source of knowledge. It is also dedicated to the current political establishment that should specifically deal with rural problems. Not with society as an imaginary whole, but on a differentiated basis, as the countryside in its diversity (as well as small or larger towns) have specific problems and needs. Analyses made by expert teams and knowledge of the development of society are usually summarised in the form of common tables and statements, but do not reflect at all the reality of life in the countryside. We wish that – let's say – for economic or environmental reasons, fields, meadows or pastures are not overgrown with shrub and that they are maintained and bring economic benefit to their owners. The question is how effective agricultural policy tools are in lowland municipalities with large land plots and a favourable climate compared to mountainous municipalities with restricted and harsher conditions. How can entrepreneurs or farmers grow crops on lands in dead-end, mountainous or hillside municipalities compared to lowland areas? Experts in this field would definitely be able to ask many more questions about positive developments in the Slovak countryside. In this publication, we do not wish to highli-

ght only the deficiencies of managing the Slovak countryside, but also to show positive examples from municipalities that have been able to develop despite their problems and enable their citizens to live a dignified life.

### **Description of the issue**

Under the state-approved APVV project<sup>1</sup>, we examined municipalities that were successful and able to adapt to the changed socio-economic environment after the fall of the Communist model of society in 1989 and the birth of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993. We perceive them as examples of good management of their development and citizens' activities. However, sociological research also points to stagnating, lagging and retarded communities in our countryside. Is there a way of reversing this more widespread negative trend? It is undoubtful that our society cares for a progressive development of the countryside, and we have therefore attempted to contribute with our research and by presenting our findings from successful municipalities within the nationwide competition Village of the Year, which is held under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment SR every second year. We want to provide our positive experience that these municipalities obtained thanks to their activities in the economic, social, and cultural fields – at a time when they were evaluated as successful, since the conditions under which these municipalities live also change over time.

The presented knowledge is based on the results of the project conducted in the period 2016–2021. We focused on the municipalities that won the “Village of the Year” competition, declared by the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic each year.

The nationwide competition Village of the Year forms part of the Village Renewal Programme, whose aim is to support rural communities in their activities to harmonically develop their

environments. The competition examines the success of such activities and awards municipalities based on established criteria called as comprehensible as possible for the general public: village as a manager; as if it was painted; as a treasure chest; as a community; as a partner; as a host; and as a garden.<sup>2</sup> The municipality that best meets the competition criteria on a cross-sectional basis<sup>3</sup> is awarded the Village of the Year prize (the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> place are also awarded, and the winners of the individual categories are declared as well).

The research, analysis and interpretations have been conducted by colleagues from the Department of Social Studies and Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, and from the Department of Ethnology and Folklore Studies of the Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. The staff of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava and an external expert in architecture and urbanism have been involved in the project as the authors of the introductory and specialised additional topics. The above-mentioned institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences has served as the research and coordination centre of the project.

Our intention was to analyse local activities in the economic, environmental, social, and cultural areas (also from the perspective of cultural heritage), and our final output was a comparative interpretation of the positive and negative aspects of the local human and cultural resources (referred to as factors and development barriers in the text below). The ambition of the project has been to highlight the qualitative differences in the current way of life in the Slovak countryside through data on the availability of services, business activities, and employment, social life, interpersonal relationships, and cooperation with surrounding municipalities, as well as in other areas of life of rural communities.

Our ambition has thus been to analyse the positive principles of sustainability and development of the rural way of life. This intention has met with a positive response also by external experts, from whose opinions I have selected the following: the project “allows for obtaining a rich empirical image of the sustainable development factors of the countryside and quality of life in it.” We are confident that we have approached this assessment not only partially.

To fulfil the purpose of the project, the research topics were divided, and research teams were set up. The university colleagues split their research to be conducted in eight municipalities into four research municipalities. The Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra took care of the research and interpretation of analyses in Liptovská Teplica, Malé Dvorníky, Soblahov, and Vlachove; the colleagues from the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica covered Hrušov, Dobrá Niva, Oravská Lesná, and Spišský Hrhov. The summary findings under the individual topics are therefore obtained in co-authorship.

In the project implementation stage and, in particular, the possibilities of meeting the planned research timeframe, the following should be stated on behalf of the entire research team. The years 2020–2021 will remain recorded in the history of humanity as the years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The government measures had an impact on the research plans not only of our project. People’s mobility (including us, researchers) across the country was largely restricted. However, since we attended the core part of the research in the previous years, the planned additional research influenced the obtained knowledge base only to a limited extent. In this book, we present the state before this unhappy situation, and we are unable to assess now how our findings and recommendations can be used in the forthcoming period. We assume that it will be citizens (the social capital of municipalities) as the only ones

being able to influence the further development of their municipalities through both individual and community activities.

A few words on the content and concept of the presented book. My introductory part (Daniel Luther) offers basic information about the project and the methodology based on which this book has been created, as well as about the motivations of the authors' team, which included not only interest in the traditional research field of this ethnological discipline, but also in understanding present-day changes in the Slovak countryside and attempting to identify, based on communication with successful municipalities, recommendations that can help their development. The next chapter is about the urban development of the studied municipalities (Peter Rusnák). The title is perhaps not accurate, as the past, present, and planned evolution of municipalities can be expected. The word "development" in the title evokes an analysis of the evolution of these municipalities in the historical context. This, however, has not been a part of the project; our objective was only to record the current state and intentions (based on the development planned by the municipalities) regarding the direction pursued by the studied municipalities. Based on the knowledge that is available about the current development of our countryside, it is both an important and a contradictory topic, especially if we take into consideration the architectonic solutions of new local buildings.

The next chapter offers concrete analyses of selected thematic areas, called by popular titles within the Village of the Year competition. The first two of them, "Village As If It Was Painted" and "Village As a Garden" were merged, with Jana Ambrózová and Zdena Krišková focusing on the building culture, public spaces, and environmental issues. The thematic areas "Village As a Partner" and "Village As a Community" were covered by Alexandra Bitušíková and Zuzana Beňušková. The titles of all our chapters in the publication respect the ethnological terminology, thus offering

a social analysis of the local communities. This analytical part is followed by two chapters dealing with selected and, in our opinion, important areas of the community life, namely the activities of church communities with an emphasis on those that work for the local community (Vladimír Bahna) and the forms of coexistence with the Roma communities and their involvement in the social life of the municipality (Tomáš Hrustič). The next research area was defined according to the competition's evaluation criteria "Village as a Manager" and "Village as a Host", which we have merged and from which Miriama Bošelová and Jolana Darulová selected issues related to economic activities and tourism. The cultural potential, called "Village as a Treasure Chest" in the competition, was dealt with by Margita Jágerová and Katarína Košťalová.

We consider the given project issue to be highly topical, as it points out to the decisive strength of human resources (social capital of the municipality), which will certainly be a key development factor after overcoming the current difficulties (coronavirus pandemic). The analysis and evaluation of the development potential and barriers to the development of rural settlements (within the competition of successful municipalities) can be further utilised, if grasped correctly. The final summaries and recommendations serve as a source of inspiration in this regard. And not only that; through this topic, we wish to offer our readers the current theoretical approaches to the study of rural issues. We appreciate the openness of the people from the studied municipalities who, according to the social restrictions understood by us, responded to our questions in an open and friendly manner. We are grateful for their confidence.

### **Theoretical and methodological inspirations<sup>4</sup>**

The ethnographic research of the Slovak countryside has specific features. Rural municipalities are socially more interconnected

compared to urban ones thanks to closer relationships between relatives and social ties. Smaller municipalities can be considered communities where social contacts are close and mutual. Larger municipalities are divided into several, mainly territorial communities (typical examples are the division into the “upper end and lower end” of municipalities, the designation of various communities according to the local toponymy or according to the name of the founding family). We consider people’s attitudes expressed in several interviews with them as community-related, due to which they require more detailed research. For this reason, we planned additional, verifying interviews in the framework of the project, which, however, we have not been able to conduct yet due to the pandemic situation. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the knowledge obtained so far is sufficient. In the research, we have applied the methodological rules of research on rural communities and culture. It is a traditional ethnographic topic, while we have respected the basic ethical guidelines.

It is comprehensible that the social conditions are essential to understanding the studied research issues, as a result of which the same evaluations and recommendations seem to appear in the authors’ analyses. Each of the studied thematic fields relates to the activities of municipality management and citizens, and the statements on economic, social, or cultural activities thus relate to almost each research topic. It should also be emphasised that more detailed analyses are published in two project monographs with a common title “*Countryside Traditional, Modern, Inspiring*”, divided according to the research municipalities (the authors are researchers from the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra).

The project title contains the term “socio-cultural capital”, which suggests that we rely on the theory of social fields by Pierre Bourdieu, who interprets individual givenness as a certain form

of capital, i.e. the abilities and social dispositions of an individual. However, the author also notes the importance of shared experiences and norms of a group(s) to which an individual pertains or which he or she claims. They are part of the individual's personality and affect his/her action. The individual forms of capital are thus structured also by the abstract capital of the given social group. In the project, we use the said group perception of the term "capital". However, the idea and notions used from the Pierre Bourdieu's concept (1998) do not constitute the theoretical basis of the project. The use of the term "socio-cultural potential" seems to be more fitting in this context. The primary intention is to explore the economic, social, and cultural conditions and the potential of successful municipalities that can significantly inspire the development of other rural settlements, as well.

Even though we had the possibility to choose by ourselves the research location, it would have required lengthy and complicated previous research and a follow-up evaluation process according to predefined criteria. The Village of the Year competition already had an evaluation methodology in place, and we trust in its conclusions until today. A certain weak point is that there can be more successful municipalities that did not apply for the competition, that the evaluation also depended on a subjective assessment by the jury, and that we only disposed of public opinion surveys on the quality of life in the municipality by means of questionnaires, with less in-depth interviews (using the ethnographic method), etc. We realised that this competition-like action is just a support tool for us when selecting the locations according to standardised methodology, and does not represent a selection of the most successful or model municipalities.

When evaluating the progressive, stagnating, or regressive development of municipalities, the term "development" is of fundamental importance – "local development" within municipal en-

vironments. I rely on the work of domestic experts; even though the knowledge from other countries is a good comparative tool, it does not provide the necessary information about the Slovak countryside. Sociologist P. Gajdoš notes that “in general, rural development is a term used for designating activities and initiatives aimed at raising the living standard... Emphasis is placed mainly on the social and economic development of rural areas” (Gajdoš 2015: 34). He notes that the perception of development as an improvement of the living conditions of the rural population is not sufficient, as it is a comprehensive term. He suggested that the multi-layered character of the term was extended by J. Bernard, relying on the work by J. Macháček (2008), who lists the following factors as the dimensions of local development: economic development (mainly employment not only within the municipality), population development, the quality of housing, civic amenities (availability of shops and services, education, etc.), quality of the infrastructure, transport, recreation opportunities (leisure, such as social life, sports, environment quality), socio-economic and psychological conditions (various elements concerning the human and social capital, cultural impacts), cultural and historical heritage, environment creation and protection, including urbanism. At the same time, he emphasises the importance of knowing the subjective perception of the quality of life by the municipality inhabitants and the primacy of endogenous local development (Bernard 2010: 19). While the enumerative list of the potential areas of local development involves an evaluative approach to the term “development”, the endogenous potential lies in local communities and actors (emic approach). The realisation of their common interests and objectives is dependent on the quality of social interactions between inhabitants, as a result of which, in this context, local development relates to the activities of the local community (Bernard 2010: 20 a. n.; Faltán 2011: 17–20; Gajdoš 2015: 36).<sup>5</sup>

In the research of contemporary rural communities, we cannot avoid learning about the evolution during the previous periods, when the fundamentals of its present-day existence were formed. It is undoubtful that the present bears the traces of the Communist economic system and subsequent social changes that took place after 1989. The transformation period significantly marked the economic and social development of the Slovak countryside. Just briefly: at the beginning of privatisation and the introduction of the market economy, the municipalities did not have the same baseline position. Even though, in the previous stage of the Communist regime, the living conditions in the countryside were considerably levelled out, there were still differences that resulted from the size and location of the municipalities within the wider region and their position within the village town system of settlement. In village towns, support was provided to the construction and services to inhabitants (housing development, cultural houses, shopping centres, healthcare facilities, schools, infrastructure), while in municipalities other than village towns (of permanent nature and those becoming extinct), investment activities were suppressed (Gajdoš 2015: 51, 100).

The transformation process was thus launched in a considerably differentiated countryside ranging from small to large municipalities; developed, stagnating; and lagging villages; in more or less developed regions; at varying distance from centres, etc. It was based on new legislative rules governing land ownership and the privatisation of socialist enterprises (single agricultural cooperatives, state-owned enterprises), which were an important incentive for the prosperity of a village. The government that preferred in 1992 a policy aimed at the “restructuring of agriculture through the support of private ownership and business, was certainly appreciated positively mainly by self-employed farmers, restorers of large estates, as well as larger agricultural entrepre-

neurs coming mainly from the former management of collective farms” (Danglová 2006: 107). Among the actors were also owners of restored lands within the boundaries of the municipality and joint owners of forests (landowners’ communities). A year later, the new government of the Slovak Republic examined the preference for individual management and focused on supporting large farms. These and several other circumstances caused various conflict variations between the interest groups of land owners, businesses, and entrepreneurs and, hence, an unequal development of municipalities. O. Danglová summarises that the transformation procedure had not only an economic effect, but also moral and symbolic consequences on social relationships and life of a rural community, which are “strongly diversified from a comparative perspective” (Danglová 2006: 102).

There are many variations between developing, stagnating, and declining municipalities, which was caused not only by the local transformation processes and activities by the population, but also modernisation and globalisation macroprocesses that penetrated in the countryside as well. The municipalities that succeeded in the Village of the Year competition seem to have well coped with this turbulent development of society and had a good starting position. In general, the situation in the Slovak countryside upon the launch of the Village of the Year competition was well characterised by Ján Pašiak (summarised by Gajdoš 2015), which allows us to make a comparison of his findings with the initial state of the studied municipalities. Among the strengths (compared to towns), he listed human values that result from a non-anonymous social environment, co-existence between neighbours and communities, common perception of public needs, increased trust and social control, the feeling of safety and local identity. What he also considered positive were ecological values (“the immediate contact with nature will increase the value of rural settlement”), values

of the cultural landscape (humanised nature), and the culture of settlement as part of the cultural heritage (while being concerned about the gradual leaving of rural settlements). What he regarded as a weakness was the insufficient technical infrastructure, the weakening human capital (growing average age, labour migration), as well as the stagnating level of the cultural and social capital.

Later sociological research showed that successful municipalities have been able to replicate the positive aspects of life in the countryside. These include, in well-developed municipalities, a relatively good socio-demographic structure, qualifications at the average level of secondary vocational education, practical skills of the majority of the rural population, residence stability, existence of personal social networks, links to the natural environment, relatively new houses and flats, technical infrastructure, availability of transport, business, and other services, coverage by telecommunication networks, and a well-functioning local self-government. The weaknesses and potential threats in larger settlements include the fragmentation of the settlement structure (the ethnological research has shown that it may be, but is not necessarily the problem of the municipality), the declining reproduction capacity and the high share of the population in post-productive age (this will be commented on by concrete analyses), a high unemployment rate (probably the key indicator), little willingness to move because of work (this criterion is relative, too), dependence on public transport, poor civic amenities, and insufficient human resources for exercising the self-government role (Gajdoš 2015: 157-161). All these are topics that fall also within our ethnological research.

The theoretical background and primary knowledge base for the preparation of this monograph also include analytical studies prepared by the project research team.<sup>6</sup> The basis is the study by Alexandra Bitušíková entitled *“Selected concepts of research on the present-day countryside: Inspirations and challenges for rural*

*anthropology*”, which dealt with the theoretical concepts of research on present-day rural regions. This work was based mainly on available foreign literature as well as disciplines close to social anthropology (mainly sociology and human geography) as inspiring sources of new theoretical and methodological findings. It represents current concepts and theories that may be inspiring for rural ethnology and anthropology, while taking into consideration the main focus of the APVV project, i.e. research on the socio-cultural potential of successful municipalities in Slovakia. In the introductory parts of this study, the authors deal with the notions “rural” and “rurality”, which are essential to this area, subsequently presenting the concepts of rural viability and resistance, sustainability, multi-functionality and peripherality. She notes that, from the point of view of the scientific focus and social benefits of the discipline, it is crucial that ethnologists and social anthropologists (of both genders) pay more attention to the research on socio-economic and cultural processes in the present-day countryside.

The changing traditional conflict between life in present-day urban and rural environments, as outlined in the introductory study, has been elaborated on by Miriama Bošelová in her chapter “*The socio-cultural aspects of present-day internal suburban migration in Slovakia – through the example of the suburban municipality of Soblahov in the Trenčín district*”. Through the example of the municipality of Soblahov, she analyses suburban migration issues as a widespread phenomenon in many, mainly suburban, municipalities across Slovakia. She focuses on the social and cultural aspects of this type of migration, such as motivations for re-settlement, co-existence within immigrant communities and in the receiving municipality, etc. Large-scale construction and increase in the number of new residents creates a pressure on the environmental and social structure of the municipality. She notes that such suburban locations are not necessarily characterised only by

social isolation, but also by a socially heterogeneous and diversified environment of new inhabitants with various expectations, life strategies, and new social relationships.

Jolana Darulová dealt with a similar issue related to residential development. In her work “Hillsides – part of the socio-cultural capital and development potential of a municipality/region (through the example of the municipalities of Hrušov and Oravská Lesná)”, she focused on the current uses of the socio-economic potential of dispersed settlements. Her general findings suggest the different forms of sustainability of this traditional form of settlement, namely the strengthening of the residential or residential-economic function by the citizens of the municipality or new-settlers, transformation into recreation purposes for local owners, visitors (in the form of lease) and cottagers (through sale). The author analyses the local economic, environmental, social, and cultural activities in the municipalities of Hrušov and Oravská Lesná in concurrence with the maintenance and functional use of vast hillside areas of Hrušov and numerous settlements in the surroundings of the centre of Oravská Lesná. She notes that the interest in their effective use has brought positive results, as well as various objective obstacles or dark sides in dealing with this type of heritage.

In her study *“Use of the socio-cultural potential of local societies through the presentation of cultural specificities”*, Zdena Krišková has analysed in her study a recent social phenomenon that began developing more intensively under the market economy conditions, namely the municipalities’ efforts to increase their visibility and attractiveness through various cultural and social activities, the motivation for which can be sought in making the cultural and social life more diverse, in the creation of opportunities for meetings natives, and in enhancing local identity through traditional phenomena, by attracting visitors at least from the

close surroundings with a potential economic effect, as well as in the pragmatic attitudes of mayors who consider inactivity to be an electoral disadvantage. The author elaborated on two examples of present-day cultural presentation. In the first case, she focused on the municipality of Hrušov and its involvement in the Hont Ecomuseum project, implemented within the wider micro-region. In the second case, she explored the municipality of Spišský Hrhov with a relatively analogical example – museum of musical instruments called MuzikMuzeum. Compared to the general trend in Slovakia, these are interesting local and museum presentation projects. In the background of these activities, there are organisational skills in the formation of the cultural and social development as a basic positive potential of the studied successful municipalities, among other things.

This topic has been dealt with from another perspective by Vladimír Bahna, who has compared in his study *“Organisation of the cultural and social life in selected successful municipalities”* the social mechanisms in the municipalities of Oravská Lesná, Liptovská Teplička and Spišský Hrhov. According to him, the similarities and differences are reflected at the level of the cultural and social life, as well as in the strategies of its development. On the one hand, we have traditional mountainous municipalities with a long-term stable or positively developing demographic situation, while on the other hand, changing municipalities with a high immigration rate (Spišský Hrhov). In the former case, activities related to the identity of a traditional municipality are carried out; in the latter one, the identity of the municipality is also created through new cultural and social activities. This reminded me of the study of a classic in ethnography, Andrej Melicherčík, today already unknown for many, under the title *The Traditional and Non-Traditional in Folk Culture* (Melicherčík 1966), in which he highlighted a natural development trend in any area of our study,

not just rural culture. Vladimír Bahna summarises that in the case of these successful municipalities, the key actors are active citizens and a self-government open to their initiatives.

This finding can be considered a universal instruction on the sustainability of the positive aspects of life in the present-day countryside and its development.

### **How do they perceive each other? Reflections by successful municipalities and the perspectives of their development**

In 2015–2017, the successful municipalities conducted analyses and prepared economic and social development plans under the Village of the Year competition (in the form of a developed SWOT analysis). Even though they were prepared mostly by external companies, they were approved by the local councils (which corrected them and agreed to their final versions). Such plans are not available in the municipalities of Dobrá Niva and Malé Dvorníky. The representatives of these municipalities did not explain to us directly the exact reason, but we assume based on our research that this could have been the satisfaction of the citizens with the visions and care by the mayor and the self-government, as well as the good condition of the municipality, or a reaction to the competitive attitudes and different development implementation strategies. Nevertheless, certain information is available on their official websites. The municipalities disposing of an analysis and development strategy provide a certain self-reflection (emic analysis) on the situation of the municipality that can also be identified in the threats and perspectives section<sup>7</sup>, i.e. certain plans for the next period. It is interesting to observe how deep their evaluations were. They took the form of detailed opinions or were just brief statements (main problems). As I have already mentioned, the following data on the studied municipalities come from the social and economic development plans of the years 2015–2017.

In the next chapter, I attempted to see the reality of their current development in selected thematic areas based on their selection. It was usually technical infrastructure, civic amenities, housing, the environment, social issues, culture and sports, and others. The intention is to point out the quality of life in relatively successful municipalities and the ambitions to improve it. This can be a good comparative tool also in understanding and assessing other municipalities of the present-day countryside. The descriptions of the strengths in the technical infrastructure, civic amenities and housing stock rely on standard characteristics of the countryside in Slovakia (electrification, public lighting, post office, school, cultural house, shops, traffic connection, fire station, etc.), however, differences between suburban municipalities (Soblahov, Spišský Hrhov, Malé Dvorníky, Vlachovo) and dead-end municipalities (Hrušov, Liptovská Teplička, Oravská Lesná) also appear. It should be noted, though, that the development of a municipality is influenced not only by its proximity to an urban centre, but also the economic maturity of the region, the size (demographic structure) of the municipality, as well as other local contexts or the above-mentioned citizens' skills that can be described by various types of individual capital. Suburban municipalities have a gas distribution system in place, are supplied with drinking water, offer better health services, have access to the highways and railway networks, bus connection, as well as rental housing (completed or under construction), and some other advantages. The amenities also include employment opportunities (local businesses within the municipality and in the near surroundings). Unlike dead-end municipalities, successful suburban municipalities do not have a major problem with these facilities and services. Their main advantage during the said period was enough free housing stock or plots for individual housing construction, which they managed to make use of only to a limited extent. They have a municipal

water supply system, however, some of them did not have at all or only have a partial sewer system with a waste water treatment plant. In addition, they offered less qualified labour force, which they described as an advantage, but it is rather a hidden consequence of the problems related to people's employment.

Another common topic is environment. There are municipalities that did not deal with this issue in their plans; however, most of them did, but to a varying degree of details. There are no major differences between suburban and dead-end municipalities. In general, they note a good state of the environment, enough greenery within the municipality, an attractive natural environment in the surroundings, as well as recreation and rest opportunities. In the environmental area, they emphasised the separated municipal waste collection system that they had in place and the disposal of technical municipal waste, also indicating the positive aspects of the facilities mentioned among the municipalities' technical amenities. The activities in some municipalities may serve as models, such as launch of family composting and the creation of a municipal composting site, a well-functioning eco-centre and eco-tamp, environmental teaching at elementary school, as well as the creation of ecological parks, engagement in environmentally-oriented associations and programmes, support of green agriculture, and environmental awareness raising among the population with good results.

Another topic that the municipalities included in their analysis is the social area, which showed a weaker ability or less courage to assess problems in this specific field, but the activities of which can be inspiring: re-training centre, pedagogical and psychological advisory centre, community centre, social advisory by existing municipal institutions, social workers, and other socially-oriented activities. Some municipalities also have social flats, catering for pensioners and social care for them (club activities) or nursing

services, which, however, are not a universal phenomenon yet. Care for elderly people and youth is essential to the further development of the countryside, which is realised by the studied municipalities.

The last common topic is culture and sports. The municipalities list several activities in the field of culture, which suggest the efforts to provide the community with community life opportunities. In the field of sports or culture, dependence on local activists is evident, as they are not prepared on an amateur (voluntary) basis. With some tolerance, dead-end municipalities seem to be a little more active in this area.

### **Development opportunities. How to move one?**

In their economic and social development plans (ESDP), successful municipalities also dealt with the formulation of opportunities that need to be addressed in order to improve the life of the citizens. An exact example of the intentions in connection with the drafting of the plans is the published statement by the management of the municipality of Soblahov: “The development vision of the municipality represents an almost idealised notion by the inhabitants of the municipality and by the local self-government management about how the municipality should look like in the long term, how its inhabitants should live in it, how they should feel in the municipality, what quality of life the municipality should offer them in the future. It is a vision mainly for the economically active and young generation of the municipality, as well as a vision for a peaceful and secure life of its citizens in the post-productive age. The idea or the development vision of the municipality is the initial step to identify the required development needs and, at a material level, it serves for setting long-term as well as short-term objectives, priorities and measures that are further detailed in the municipality’s long-term programme document.”<sup>8</sup>

The analyses have a section in which the municipalities assessed and recorded their deficiencies and set the targets for their development in the forthcoming period. They thus completed the data about the state of the municipality in the given period. It is an interesting summary of information, as they paid greater attention to it than to the “strengths” in which they described their advantages. They show that even the municipalities that are successful in the Village of the Year competition are not as ideal as it would seem according to the descriptions. This is a good finding, as the involved municipalities understood the possibilities of their economic and social development as an opportunity and defined, at least for the next period, the possibilities of improvement in the set areas. The list of their published intentions is so long that they would disproportionately extend this text. They mainly point out to the weakness or deficiencies in the economic field, social co-existence, and citizens’ engagement.

In general, it can be stated that the individual municipalities chose different fields of opportunities and problematic areas according to their knowledge: they either placed emphasis on their economic development, or on the social needs of mainly elderly and vulnerable population groups, while others stressed both of these interconnected development possibilities. Even though these strategies reflect the opinion of the municipality management, their statements are also based on the obtained knowledge and citizens’ needs. During the preparation of their ESDP, local self-governing authorities conducted surveys among their citizens, interviews at public meetings and on other occasions, which tells about the wider knowledge of the problems and needs. I offer their plans mainly in the social field, which appeared to be decisive for the municipal development in our research.

Since the plans of the municipalities are available on their public websites, allow me to present a selection of activities in their

preferred social area with the intention of presenting their inspiring mission. In Dobrá Niva, they want to focus on supporting activities in, for example, self-help resolution of local problems, support and development of volunteering, education and requalification of citizens, while in Spišský Hrhov they pursue the development of various community activities. The self-government in Liptovská Teplička perceives the problem of the local Roma community, the non-existence of a community centre, and a missing infrastructure for people's leisure activities. In Hrušov, they see the improvement of their citizens' lives mainly in the economic development of the municipality. The management of Oravská Lesná plans to complete the missing infrastructure of social facilities in the municipality, improve their quality, and assist the local Roma community in a targeted way. The municipality of Soblahov aims to focus primarily on education in the field of internet skills and human resources development, as well as on social and housing policy, which is a similar priority for all municipalities under our research. And finally, the municipality of Vlachovo, which sees its immediate role in ensuring social care for its citizens and in the reconstruction of municipal buildings. It can be concluded that successful municipalities consider the social area to be an essential field of care as a basis for other economic, cultural, or social activities.

In this introductory part, I rely on my own evaluation of the municipalities and visions of their further development, as published in their development plans. In the next book chapters, my colleagues offer their actual findings that confront the situation after some time, when this book was written.

## **RESEARCH ANALYSES AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS**

This section is based on the findings from field research conducted by specialised experts in the framework of the project The Socio-Cultural Capital of Successful Municipalities as a Source of Sustainable Development of the Slovak Countryside (APVV-16-0115).

### **THE URBANISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES<sup>9</sup>**

The location of settlements is one of the determining factors of their development. It is important in what geographical environment the municipality is situated: whether it is an area with a demographic decline, whether it is located in a lagging or developed region, in the vicinity of a town with close ties to it or whether it is isolated, what is its transport accessibility, etc.

From the point of view of the location of municipalities in relation to towns, we can define two categories, namely:

- municipalities in the vicinity of a town – suburban municipalities;
- typical rural municipalities.

The following municipalities are included in the suburban municipalities category:

- Soblahov near the regional capital of Trenčín;
- Malé Dvorníky near the district town of Dunajská Streda,
- Spišský Hrhov near the district town of Levoča.

The other rural municipalities can be divided into two groups:

- small municipalities – Hrušov and Vlachovo;
- large rural centres – Liptovská Teplička, Dobrá Niva, Oravská Lesná.

A municipality within a demographically progressive area grows naturally in terms of population and develops. A municipality in the vicinity of a town grows as well if it is able to create the conditions for the influx of inhabitants. On the other hand, municipalities in lagging districts decline gradually. Nevertheless, the isolation of a municipality from the point of view of its location does not necessarily mean that it declines. It depends on the quality of the community and its mobilisation. It is obvious, though, that the position plays an important role in municipal development. It is either an opportunity or a barrier.

Another criterion of municipal development is population size. It appears that the higher the size category of the municipality, the higher is its success in the Village of the Year competition. Not a single municipality with a population of up to 500 succeeded in the competition, even though this category is the most numerous in Slovakia – up to 41% of municipalities have up to 5,000 inhabitants. Only one fourth of the municipalities awarded the Village of the Year title is from the category of municipalities with a total population of up to 1,000, while these municipalities represent a total of 68% of all municipalities in Slovakia. Municipalities with a population over 1,000 are more successful. This suggests that the competition is very demanding for small municipalities, and their personal, professional, and material capacities are unable to compete with larger ones.

We have obtained interesting results by observing the statistical data on population development in the studied municipalities. In 1961–1991, the studied municipalities achieved an overall population decline by 7%, while Slovakia reported an increase by

19% during the same period. This development is due to managed urbanisation. A completely opposite trend can be observed for the period of the last 27 years. While the overall population growth in Slovakia is only 3.1%, the number of inhabitants in the studied municipalities increased by 23%. It is the consequence of the cancellation of managed urbanisation and the enabling of the development of all municipalities. It is a certain proof of growing interest in living in the countryside. Only the two smallest municipalities did not record any increase during that period, even though the decline in their population was smaller than in the previous reference period. That means that, overall, it was the only two municipalities that recorded a population decline. It should be noted that mainly suburban municipalities show a considerable population increase. Spišský Hrhov (a suburban municipality) is unique in this regard, having recorded a declining trend during the socialist period. In percentage terms, it achieved the largest decrease in population and, on the contrary, after 1991, it recorded a significant population increase by almost 80%. The reversed development when it comes to the population size in Oravská Lesná is also remarkable in this respect, considering that it recorded the highest absolute decline by 1991 and the highest absolute growth after 1991, even though it is not a suburban municipality.

The urbanistic development of the municipalities was very varied and was influenced by the location, natural conditions, the economic situation as well as the state urbanisation policy. While the development of rural municipalities before 1948 was shaped naturally in historic continuity in both urbanistic and architectural terms, there was a rapid change after 1948.

The preservation of the predecessors' heritage was considered a bourgeois relic and an expression of hostility against society. A new paradigm of the countryside was promoted and, in the spi-

rit of the slogan of correcting imbalances between cities and the countryside, new type of construction of villa houses with a square floor plan and an attic penetrated the countryside. At the same time, new urbanistic elements entered the original ground plans of municipalities – direct streets and rectangular lands. This considerably marked the nature of the village which became even more distorted by the so-called catalogue construction of family houses. This resulted in full suppression of the identity of the municipalities, resulting in the construction of houses suitable for lowlands in mountainous regions and vice versa. From the point of view of municipal development, the development of settlements was largely affected by managed urbanisation that was accompanied by town character of villages, which means that there was a selection of municipalities for development, stagnation, or building closure. In this way, the state regulated the development of settlements and ensured the availability of public services.

The situation completely changed after 1990, when managed urbanisation was cancelled and all settlements became equal, assuming responsibility for urban planning. Unrestrained freedom of constructional expressions replaced standardised catalogue construction, as a result of which elements of Alpine, Mediterranean, as well as Mexican architecture emerged. The new material possibilities and their availability also influenced the colours of architectural designs. The commonly monotonous colours of houses were from time to time replaced by tawdry ones. What was positive about this free period of municipal development was that this wave of material internationalism led to a relatively strong need to realise one's own identity and that people began paying more attention to their cultural heritage. They were also motivated by the alarming condition of monuments, especially those that were transferred to private hands. In addition, the opening up to the world and Europe made people to realise the need

to preserve their unique character and strengthen their identity. Even though we have failed to preserve our identity in the field of construction, we have at least undertaken to safeguard its spiritual values.

### BUILDING CULTURE, PUBLIC SPACE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACHES TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES<sup>10</sup>

Especially in the past, the geographical position had a direct impact on the overall building culture, as well as on population density and settlement structure. Through its climate conditions, terrain, and availability of natural resources, it shaped the range of the used building materials and technology and primary forms of subsistence, and ultimately, it was also reflected in the typological diversity of buildings within the municipality itself as well as in their layout and functional elements. Even after the interruption of the continuity of traditional construction during the transition years of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this building culture represents, in the form of preserved residential, farming, technical or church buildings (regardless of the today's degree of conservation and condition of these buildings in the given municipalities) – an important basis that has a potential to positively influence the overall genius loci of the location as well as the cultural identity of its inhabitants, the conservation of special cultural elements, the cultural capital and tourist potential, or the architectural design and aesthetics of new buildings at present. In this context, we observed a wide range of prerequisites and strategies for development which were, certainly, influenced by many other factors – the administrative position, proximity of an urban centre and main communication routes, intensity of urbanisation processes, demographic development, changes in employment

and labour migration, or the overall economic vitality of a district and region.

Localities with a considerably rugged terrain accompanied by scattered hillside settlements far from centres become attractive in terms of tourism and culture thanks to their natural environment. Remote hillside areas offer an ideal environment for rest and relaxation, which leads to great interest in seasonal or weekend housing. On the other hand, their attractive geographical environment with well-preserved constructional specificities (e.g. much sought-for wine cellars) determines their orientation towards traditional manifestations of culture, their safeguarding and presentation also in the case of traditional forms of building.

The administrative location is a significant positive aspect in the architectural context. Location along the main road or relative proximity to centres and good transport connections support the influx of the population, which is one of the prerequisites for the enhancement of individual construction thanks to the interest of the inhabitants of nearby cities. Small satellite towns are thus gradually being formed in municipalities, or separate parts and streets with new buildings are being created in the village. In dead-end municipalities, where accessibility and social relationship to the environment are limited, the benefits of close communication disappear.

In the field of building culture in the studied locations, the preserved monuments of folk culture or technical or historical ones form an intrinsic part of their socio-cultural capital. Several of them are entered in the Register of Immovable National Cultural Monuments of the Slovak Republic. Within their internal context, the municipalities pay attention to the safeguarding of traditional elements of folk building with the aim of intensively strengthening the cultural identity of the local community, while within the external one, with the aim of increasing the attractiveness of the

municipality from the point of view of visitors (Krišková 2021: 215–231).

The decisive factors of building and housing development include the settlement of land ownership, which is a problematic issue in Slovakia. What is very positive is the settlement of land ownership in the municipality of Spišský Hrhov as a prerequisite for subsequent development of individual construction or construction of flats for rent. The municipality continuously purchases lands, arranges the construction of engineering networks, and subsequently sells them. In this regard, the primary advantage of the municipality is the functioning of municipal companies with a focus on building activities, thus also addressing the employment of mainly the disadvantaged population groups. Ensuring construction and lands with engineering networks increases the lucrativeness of the offer for construction. A similar positive situation in dealing with land ownership can be observed mainly in suburban municipalities. In general, these villages are characterised by intensive reconstruction of existing family houses.

The weak points of all studied municipalities include the negative consequences of the modernisation of construction, which often disrupts the architectural character of the area and is characterised by a lack of harmony between the traditional and the modern. This element prevails mainly in connection with construction on hillsides, where owners often consider free space a weakness of the legal regulations. The municipalities seek to prevent the negative effects of construction by introducing regulations in their zoning plans, which in most cases define the distance between individual buildings, limit the number of floors, or ensure a uniform character by observing the shape of roofs.<sup>11</sup>

In general, the support of construction contributes to the modernisation of municipalities, promotes further development of both technical and cultural infrastructure, as well as the stabili-

sation of the existing population, and increases the influx of new inhabitants; however, the extent depends on the more complex external and internal conditions of the municipalities.

From the point of view of the comprehensive nature of municipalities' building culture, small architecture forms their integral part both at the sacral and profane level. Elements of small sacral architecture, represented by roadside crosses and chapels, dominate in villages with a strong religious accent of Roman Catholic belief. The continuity of traditional culture and a clear concept enhancing public spaces are expressed by small architectural elements, such as stylised roofs of bus stops, benches, trash bins, etc. Information boards and orientation sign posts are also an important element in this regard. On the other hand, modernisation resulted mainly in the reconstruction and adjustment of municipal buildings, schools, and sports grounds in all municipalities.

Technical infrastructure and the existence of engineering networks are another determining factor of the quality of life in the countryside. The completion of sewerage (including waste water treatment plants) and gasification and, in some cases, the ensuring of drinking water quality still represent an unresolved problem, though not to an equal extent. According to the local self-governments, it is technically complicated to ensure their availability in small settlements located far from the centre. The situation is similar when it comes to the construction and maintenance of roads and pathways within municipalities, including cottage areas.

The public space that reflects the life and culture of society is an important aspect in the building culture of municipalities also in connection with the safeguarding and presentation of traditional cultural elements. We have recorded great efforts to create parks and green rest areas as well as to maintain and extend green areas on private lands in the vicinity of houses or in the public space of

all studied municipalities. All of them consider an impressive and aesthetically balanced external appearance as one of their valuable benefits.

The role of strong leaders supported by an experienced self-government team, a pro-active approach by important personalities and citizens in general has a positive impact on

## LOCAL COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS<sup>12</sup>

The following factors are monitored when evaluating the Village of the Year in the category “Village as a Congregation”: schools, social care, sports and rest, the scope and diversity of activities within associations and clubs and other interest groups, the conditions for meeting, cultural, social and sports events, education and awareness raising, communication and work with people with an emphasis on marginalised groups, and citizens engagement in municipal activities. We use the term “local community”, commonly used in ethnology, instead of the term congregation. In the “Village as a Partner” category, the establishment of partnerships at the local and regional level, international cooperation, exchange of experiences, the existence of strategic and development documents, and the participation of the lay and expert public in planning are assessed.

These two categories differ: while the “Village as a Congregation” (local community) reflects the social and family life in the municipality as such, usually organised “bottom up”, the “Village as a Partner” category rather reflects the work of the mayor and of the local self-government as important local actors.

We consider local community to be a relatively small and homogenous social formation. It consists of people living within quite small and compactly settled areas, whose relationships are

based on knowing each other and on the identification of their members. It is characterised mainly by common territory, interpersonal relationships, and social interactions (extended by common standards, values, and interests)<sup>13</sup>. The success of the development of each municipality and its community is largely dependent on the level of relationships and cooperation between the members of both formal and informal associations, the ability to interlink and overbridge their interests and activities, as well as the internal coherence of social groups, from family through neighbourly and friendly relationships.

According to our findings, the common objective of the activities in the social field is to prevent the exclusion and social isolation of vulnerable individuals and to strengthen cohesion between the municipality citizens. The studied municipalities seek to ensure social services to the elderly as well as handicapped and socially vulnerable people, including social counselling, catering, transport of handicapped people to the closest town, and some municipalities even attempt to employ citizens with disabilities to work for the municipal office.

Another group dependent on social assistance are unemployed people with low qualifications, who have a small chance of getting employed (in some municipalities, mainly members of the Roma minority). Some municipalities consider it their obligation to compensate for certain social handicaps by engaging these citizens in activation works or community service by setting up protected workshops or municipal/social enterprises.

In the social area, the self-governments of the studied municipalities are also aware of the important role of a local school (Bitušíková 2021: 73-83). Elementary schools, mainly in larger successful municipalities, seek to be competitive at the regional level and attractive to citizens to prevent parents from taking their children to schools in towns where they usually work. Children thus

gain a close relationship to the municipalities and get to know each other, understanding it as an important contribution to the future integrity of the municipality. Several schools offer shelter to elementary art schools, and the educational process also involves grandparents, mainly in the field of regional education. Two of the studied municipalities dispose of special (also outdoor) classrooms and spaces for experiential learning with a focus on environmental education, art, crafts, the growing of crops and herbs, beekeeping, sheep breeding, bread baking, etc. Similar activities are also carried out in some other municipalities, but to a smaller extent. Elementary and art schools offer children and youth ample opportunities for leisure activities, playing an important role in the cultural and social life of each municipality.

All studied municipalities are known for their rich cultural, social and sports life, usually organised by active individuals. It is often them who initiate the creation of various civic voluntary associations, clubs, or informal teams. The local self-government is often an active partner to civic initiatives, providing partial financial assistance, spaces, sometimes even professional support (for instance, in the form of cultural staff), or by offering events to be held under the auspices of the municipal self-government. Senior clubs are interesting in this regard, organising numerous activities, such as balls, harvest festivals, trips across Slovakia and abroad.

By supporting social integration, the local self-government has a significant impact on the quality and intensity of social relations and cooperation within the municipality. The factors that influence citizens' mobilisation in favour of the local community are either objective (location of the municipality, size, demography, social structure, infrastructure, etc.) or subjective (personal characteristics and political orientation of the mayor and self-government representatives, lack of quality candidates running for the local council, etc.).<sup>14</sup> Within their competences, local self-go-

vernments bear responsibility for municipal development, which relates to the necessary acquisition of funds through development programmes, mainly EU funds or non-state resources. In most municipalities, several public spaces (squares, amphitheatres, relaxation zones, sports grounds, and children's playgrounds) have been built or revitalised as important places for social communication and meeting of the local population either in everyday life or during various municipal events.

To improve communication and information services, all municipalities have ensured high-quality internet connection and created space at schools or in libraries for the public to work with the internet. Most municipalities have a local public address system and publish printed or online newspapers, and also provide information through their websites. Social networks are used for informal communication between the citizens.

The research also focused on the significance of partnerships at the local, regional, national, and transnational level, the ability and openness of the municipalities to collaborate with various actors "from the inside" and "from the outside", the willingness to exchange experience, the level of strategic and development documents, as well as citizens' involvement in the preparation of such documents and in the planning of the development of their respective municipality.

In all these indicators, the primary role is played by the local self-government – the mayor of the municipality, the local council (deputies), and the employees of the municipal office, while the key position is that of the mayor. This could be observed in all studied municipalities. The personal characteristics of the main representatives of the local self-government, mainly mayors, appeared to be highly important. As the research has shown, the work style, way of communication, education, openness, transparency, equal access to all citizens, the courage to join domestic and

foreign projects, the willingness to cooperate with other actors within the municipality (school director, priest, youth and the elderly, cultural workers, entrepreneurs) are characteristics that help the mayor obtain wide support and citizens' recognition. On the other hand, the closed nature of the mayor and of the entire municipal office, the unwillingness to communicate and cooperate, incompetence, non-transparency, lack of experience with projects and mistrust in civic participation can hamper the development of the entire municipality and fail to contribute to the building of citizens' trust in the self-government. The importance of the quality of human resources in the local self-government was also highlighted by previous research conducted in other rural settlements in Slovakia.

What appears to work best under bilateral or multilateral relations between municipalities is cooperation on the basis of specific activities, mainly sport (football leagues, running competitions, cycle tourism – interconnecting municipalities by cycling routes) or cultural, mainly folklore events (Beňušková 2019: 158-167; Jágerová 2020: 223-235).

## THE PARTICIPATION OF CHURCHES IN SOCIAL LIFE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT<sup>15</sup>

In this selection of findings, we focused on church activities related to social life in the studied municipalities. The Slovak countryside is characterised by a high extent of traditional religiosity associated with church life,<sup>16</sup> which plays an important role in the religious life of individuals and, in addition, significantly contributes to the daily life of communities. Within the church environment, attention is paid to activities such as folk missions, youth pastoring, assistance to families, etc., often reaching bey-

and the limits of purely religious activities. These include leisure, socialisation, cultural and social activities that also involve the objective of strengthening the believers' community. Within the academic environment in Slovakia, this phenomenon has not yet been paid systematic attention.

The modern definitions of community, used in sociology and psychology, agree that a community is characterised by several elements, the key ones of which are: living in a common locality; existence of personal relationships based on common interests and objectives; carrying out common activities in which collective solidarity is reflected.<sup>17</sup> Not all types of communities must meet these three characteristics in the same manner; however, with regard to rural municipalities it can be assumed that all of them are interconnected and complement each other. The research in our municipalities confirms that, just like in the case of individuals, we can speak of different types of capital (economic, cultural, social, political, etc.) also in the case of groups or communities, while one of the key elements of the development of healthy and well-working communities is their social capital which, at group level, represents mutual trust, reciprocity, collective identity, and a sense for a common future of its members.<sup>18</sup>

Church parishes which represent the main form of religious community in our environment integrate the functional aspects of a shared locality, a network of personal relationships and collective action with the superior idea of church and religious ideas. In most Christian churches, the parish is organised so that the central part of liturgical and religious activities is concentrated into the residential area. The functioning of parishes is therefore naturally sensitive to local demographic and social changes or the number of active members.<sup>19</sup> In small residential settlements, neighbourhood and religious communities naturally overlap and blend. Research on church activities in social life should therefore

be an integral part of the research on rural municipalities development.

Naturally, the ritual aspects of religious life (liturgy, sacraments) as such are not able to create or replace well-functioning personal relationships and a healthy community. As an example, our own research within the Catholic Church shows that a parish that fulfils all ritual functions and satisfies the religious needs of both believers and individuals does not necessarily represent a well-functioning community and that well-functioning parish communities are largely related to believers' active personal contact with the priest even beyond explicit religious activities.<sup>20</sup>

Parish activities that extend into the social and cultural life and believers' leisure activities thus contribute to the development of a religious community, without necessarily having religious contents. In addition, they may strengthen social cohesion that would manifest itself also outside the religious context. As noted above, one of the key elements of a community is the existence of a network of personal relationships, and collective activities are the main way such relationships are created. Modern psychological research shows that collectively physically coordinated activities such as sports, singing, music, etc. or laughing or eating together<sup>21</sup> create and enhance positive social relationships between the participants, suppress conflicts, increase mutual trust and the willingness to cooperate, and evoke the sense of belonging between the participants.

There are many active individuals, associations, and organisations within rural municipalities that create and organise social events and interest activities which along with their primary focus (sports, culture, hobby, etc.) generate positive social interactions and relations between the participants. One of the actors of such activities are, naturally, churches and religious associations and organisations.

I offer several examples of many activities that enhance social life in the studied municipalities. Most inhabitants of the municipality of **Soblahov** (in Western Slovakia) claim the Roman Catholic faith (85%). There is a pastoral centre at the local parish, which serves for various social activities, often dedicated to children and youth. They organise “barbecue parties” for children, which refers to events with refreshments and a sports or entertainment programme. These events are held mainly on the occasion of the first communion, confirmation, the beginning of the school year, as well as other occasions (e.g. children’s carnival). In addition, they organise the parish feast on St. Nicholas Day or the parish day on Ss. Peter and Paul Day, related to the Family Day. On the occasion of the National Week of Marriage, a “romantic dinner for spouses” is organised there. The pastoral centre also organises meetings with pensioners or charitable collections. Another important social activity is the Parish Ball. The central activities of the pastoral centre include the organisation of pilgrimages and children’s summer camps. Local female activists with children joined the nationwide charitable fundraising called Good News (Dobrá novina) in the form of Christmas carolling.

The municipality of **Hrušov** is a dead-end (relatively isolated) municipality in southern Slovakia. The dominant Roman Catholic orientation is confirmed by data from the last 2011 census (95%). Affiliation to the Catholic faith is perceived in the municipality as part of the local identity, and religion plays an important role in the lives of individuals and families. There is an active praying and a relatively numerous Rosary Brotherhood in the village, as well as the Community of God’s Heart (since 2004), which pursues strong interest in spiritual life. However, the local parish is not involved much in the social and cultural aspects of the municipal life. The personal initiatives of the current priest include mainly the reconstruction of sacral buildings in cooperation with the municipali-

ty.<sup>22</sup> Even though the parish is thus actively engaged in non-religious activities in the municipality, it does not assume the role of a social leader and does not mobilise or motivate cooperation in social and cultural life. The parish does not even pursue targeted activities oriented on youth. As described by several respondents, it is rather expected that the initiative must come primarily from the believers. The religious community participates in the nationwide Christian charitable fundraising Good News. Among the activities of the parish focused on adults, we can mention the organisation of parish pilgrimages at which the priest acts as a guide (Roma, Mariazell, Lourdes, etc.). It should also be mentioned that there are up to ten different associations and societies active in this relatively small municipality, which largely occupy the field of social and cultural needs of its population.

**Vlachovo** (in the south of central Slovakia) is the only of the studied municipalities with a majority of its citizens claiming the Evangelical Augsburg (Protestant) confession (66%) and, in terms of population size, the smallest community of believers. Despite the relatively low share of believers and lower attendance of masses, membership in the Evangelical Church is perceived as part of the local identity. Just like in other studied municipalities, in which folk traditions and folklore are actively maintained, the church and the customs calendars are interlinked also here through several social events. This is manifested mainly during the Christmas period. Since the 1990s, an event cycle has been organised there, called Vlachovské Vianoce (Vlachovo Christmas). The church assembly intensively cooperates with the municipal office. The municipality obtained from the church assembly the spaces near the church, creating in them a Social Club and using them for various social events. The official mass is part of the Municipal Days of Vlachovo, which take place in mid-August and includes a crafts fair and a folklore festival. On the other hand, the

Day of Remembrance of the Consecration of the Temple, which is celebrated at the end of November, evolved into a two-day social event called the Feast of Vlachovo, which includes, along official masses, village slaughter with the preparation of meat specialties and a rich cultural programme with the participation of local music bands.

In 2011, 93% of the population of the municipality of *Liptovská Teplička* (dead-end municipality in the north of central Slovakia) claimed the Roman Catholic faith. The village promotes a living cultural heritage and folklore traditions in which the customs cycle overlaps with the church calendar. The church activities are thus naturally pulled into the social life and, vice versa, references to religion are also contained in activities in which the parish is not directly involved. A large part of them relates to the Christmas season, including a live nativity scene in the centre of the municipality on St. Stephen's Day, Nativity Prayer Meeting, or concerts on the Epiphany Day. The recent events that interlink church activities and folklore include a new phenomenon of creating Advent wreaths in the centre of the village. This was accompanied by the singing of carols and Christmas songs performed by a local folklore group, around which the citizens gather after the midnight mass.<sup>23</sup> The activities oriented on children include the Nativity Prayer Meeting. Children from the village also join the Christmas charitable fundraising activity Good News. They also prepare various performances with religious themes and organise meetings with senior people.

*Dobrá Niva* (in central Slovakia) is the only of the studied municipalities where different Christian traditions of the region have met. Two churches are simultaneously active there. According to the 2011 census, over 44% of the population claimed to be members of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, and 38% of the Roman Catholic Church. There are two confessionally

defined and used churches. The events of ecumenical nature are only represented by a recent custom – the placing of a large Advent wreath in the centre of the municipality, accompanied by a cultural programme created on the initiative of the municipal office. The event with an ecumenical mass, consecration of the wreath, and the burning of candles is attended jointly by the local representatives of both churches.

The Social Activities Centre of the Evangelical Assembly is concentrated around the Assembly House in the vicinity of the parish. The main events are the Sports Day, Christmas events and, in particular, the Parish Day, a part of which takes place in the Protestant church (mass, blessing of children and teachers, and choir performances and another part with refreshments and other accompanying programme in the premises of the Assembly House. The Assembly also organises summer children's camps. From time to time, concerts are also held in the Protestant church (mainly during the Advent period).

The Catholic parish disposes of a reconstructed historic granary, which is used as an informal club house for youth. The youth activities are conditional on proper behaviour. No independent Catholic youth association has been formed there either. The Catholic parish largely supports pilgrimage tourism.

In terms of population size, *Oravská Lesná* (northern dead-end municipality) is the largest of the studied municipalities. From the total number of 3,299 inhabitants in 2011, the Roman Catholic faith was claimed by 95% of them. Given the size of the municipality and the level of religiousness, there is high demand for activities for children and youth<sup>24</sup>, in particular the Christmas charity event Good News before Christmas. This event has been organised in the municipality on a continuous basis, and in recent years it has been attended by around 70 children. The St. Anne Church becomes the venue of music concerts several times a year,

with the performance of various, mainly gospel bands. The regular concerts in the church are usually held during the Christmas season, with music bands performing songs with religious themes or folklore groups (domestic or invited ones) and singing carols and Christmas songs.

In the municipality of *Malé Dvorníky* (in south-western lowlands), the Catholic faith was claimed by 84% of inhabitants in 2011. The regular mass is usually held only once a week, as the capacity of the local church is only a few dozens of persons. The religious life of the believers is largely tied to the parish church in the nearby district town. However, an official mass with wide people's participation takes place on the feast of the church patron. On this occasion, a music festival is also organised in the municipality. Nevertheless, there is an absence of social activities initiated by or linked to the parish, which is primarily due to the local church organisation. The parish covers several municipalities, as a result of which the priests are unable to respond to the needs and suggestions by believers and initiate or engage in social life.

In *Spišský Hrhov* (northern suburban municipality), the Catholic faith is claimed by 80% of the inhabitants (according to the last census in 2011). At present, there is a large share of new-settlers there. Many of them are non-believers or non-practicing believers, and many of the active believers practice their religious life largely outside the municipality – either at the place of their origin, or they prefer masses in the nearby district town. During the past period, several priests have come to the municipality and left after a short time. Even though they developed broader activities among the believers, these did not continue later. The current priest wishes to be actively engaged mainly towards children and youth. In the past, he worked as a dean in Oravská Lesná, and has therefore rich experience in social activities organised by the pa-

rish. It will be interesting to observe in what way the municipality will develop in this regard.

These characteristics of the studied municipalities have not focused primarily on the general issue of religion. We have not dealt with individual religiousness or religious convictions of the believers, but with the overlap of religious and cultural-social life. From this perspective, it is evident that the degree of declared affiliation to churches in the individual municipalities is not a reliable predictor of the degree to which church life is integrated into the municipality's social activities and community development. It depends on many factors – personal skills, age, personal interests of the individual actors, relations within the municipality, church organisation of parishes, size of the village and/or parish, etc. – whether the initiative is taken over by priests or parishioners, or whether it arises under mutual interaction, or whether it does not arise at all. The above overview shows primarily examples of positive practice.

The main aspect of the participation of churches in social events in municipalities is the interlinking of important events in municipal life with events in the parish or church assembly. This relation is developed also in connection with spontaneous or staged observance of the traditional and church calendar or by incorporating official prayer meetings into the programmes of church, social, or folklore festivities, etc.

One of the main church activities in the studied municipalities is work with children and youth. Whether these activities gain a wider social impact depends on the degree to which leisure and entertainment activities are attached to religious education, able to engage children and youth in a comprehensive manner. What certainly contributes to the achievement of this objective is when the parish or the church assembly disposes of own appropriately furnished spaces, such as pastoral centres or assembly houses

providing the necessary background to many activities. Most demanding in terms of organisation are long-term camps or daily camps during summer holidays. Work with children develops significantly when a Christian youth community is formed in municipalities, creating programmes for younger children and, thus, for themselves. The creation and, in particular, long-term persistence of such communities depend on a successful generational change. Certainly, only a certain part of people has the necessary willingness, time, personal skills, and interest, just like for any organisational activity, as a result of which the generation change largely depends also on the size of the individual generations. The children's activities, on purpose or for organisational reasons, often include parents' participation, which results, in addition to the creation of social relationships among children, in the building of relationships also among adults.

#### CO-EXISTENCE WITH ROMA COMMUNITIES AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL LIFE<sup>25</sup>

The Roma are more significantly represented in three of the studied municipalities (Hrušov, Liptovská Teplička, Spišský Hrhov), which will form the subject of our interest. They are similar to a certain degree, since they have long built on improving public spaces and on the social and community life. Nevertheless, they are different when it comes to relations with the local Roma communities.

One of the recorded statements by a local citizen from *Hrušov* suggests the attitude of the Slovak majority population towards the Roma community: "Why should we work for the village part-time, if we have unemployed Roma here?" To explain it, the Roma carrying out activation works are often marked with glaring

reflective vests and are therefore considered a clean-up crew that cleans public spaces, repairs pathways, and sweeps the streets.<sup>26</sup> This imbalance is transferred into the attitudes of the majority, according to which the Roma are there to clean up.

The municipality has around 16% of its inhabitants of Roma nationality who live in the settlement on the periphery of the municipality. Most houses in this locality are made of bricks, have one or two rooms and, with one exception, they do not have the lands and title deeds settled. Four Roma families live in a block of flats together with non-Roma citizens, which is a negligible group from the point of view of the relationships with the non-Roma population. The general population consider the Roma a problem community, and their mutual relations are limited only to common contacts in the public space or the occasional hiring of the Roma for auxiliary works in the household or farm. Many Roma in Hrušov are employed in the accessible surroundings of the municipality, as a result of which unemployment is no longer as significant as in the recent past.

*Liptovská Teplička* has around 35% of inhabitants of Roma origin. In the recent years, the municipality representatives managed to obtain several projects focused on the development of the Roma settlement. What they consider one of the greatest successes in this field is that, in the course of the past several years, they have gradually changed the concept of social services in the municipality, which means that they have set up their own social and nursing services. In addition, they began developing field social work focused on the Roma community. Before submitting the project, the citizens complained that it was something “again for the Roma”; however, after seven years of its functioning, it is a service that is used by the Roma and non-Roma half by half, in particular the elderly and lonely people. In addition, when writing the application, they prudently included homeless people

as a target group. The locals protested even against this, as the local Roma are not homeless. These disputes imply a complicated nature of the relations between the Roma and the general Slovak population. They are influenced by the attitudes of three power fields that affect and influence each other.<sup>27</sup> Firstly, it is people from the Roma community, who seek to formulate their requirements and needs mainly in the field of housing and improvement of their living standards. Then it is the current mayor who, as the statutory representative of the municipality, seeks to ensure resources through a number of available projects and calls. And the third significant power that influences decision-making are the local deputies who largely reflect the opinions of the non-Roma citizens, indirectly carrying in the decision-making processes the feelings and wishes of a large part of the municipality inhabitants.

The municipality of *Spišský Hrhov* is presented in the media as an example of a successful integration of the Roma community mainly thanks to systematic work in the field of Roma employment and improvement of housing conditions.<sup>28</sup> This success is rightly attributed to the long-year mayor of Spišský Hrhov, V. Ledecký, who has been able to manage the interpersonal relations within the municipality. Spišský Hrhov is often presented as a model example to other municipalities with a Roma population. However, V. Ledecký constantly emphasises that no municipality can be successful only by mechanically copying what they have done in Spišský Hrhov. Work with the Roma community is only one important part of the entire mosaic – it must be part of a wider approach to the management of the entire village. Over time, what he perceives as a key instrument to launching a positive development of the municipality is that the mayor “builds cohesion between people and creates the conditions for people to meet and debate and to jointly look for solutions; they can

thus always find something, a project or an idea to enhance the municipality”.

There is a strong pressure among the non-Roma majority population in all three municipalities to divide social life based on ethnic boundaries. The mayors, including those who seek to change it have very limited possibilities of how to cope with this adverse situation. The major challenge for the municipalities is the prevailing anti-Roma attitude in common interpersonal relations and, in many cases, even at the institutional level (schools, local restaurants, church institutions, etc.). In reality, social life in the villages is traditionally divided along ethnic boundaries, while there are few opportunities for mutual meetings and the sharing of common time and space.

#### ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF MUNICIPALITIES AND TOURISM<sup>29</sup>

The aim of this part is to reveal the economic potential of successful municipalities with an emphasis on the possibilities of employing citizens, the engagement of local businesses, factories, foresters and farmers, the ecological use of local resources, farming, fruit growing and livestock breeding, farm shops, the creation of conditions for increasing employment, etc. With regard to tourism, the research focused on hospitality, the quality of facilities serving to visitors, catering, sports, cultural-social and auxiliary services, the use of the features of the local character, promotion, information posts, recreational paths and tourist trails, cycle routes, places of rest, attractive sites within the area, etc. In addition to field research, the municipalities' economic and socio-cultural development plans were also considered, as well as their approved and published SWOT analyses and available statistics.

### ***Reflections on the socio-economic potential of selected municipalities***

The external development factors include the geographical position of the municipality, the natural conditions, size of the village in terms of the number of inhabitants and population density, the administrative affiliation to the district and region, the degree of the socio-economic development of the region, distance from urban centres, and their accessibility. From the point of view of the above factors, the municipalities were largely differentiated. The research suggests that the location of the village is not necessarily the decisive factor of lower unemployment. The opportunities created within the municipality are also important. The unemployment rate in the studied municipalities was between 1–3.5% (six municipalities) and 5.6–6.3% (two municipalities) in 2020, which is low in the context of the nationwide indicators. Vlachovo can serve as an example in this regard. The resources in this mining area have also been depleted, their exploitation is no longer profitable, and many of the plants, previously the largest employers in the entire district, were closed (2008). Nevertheless, the unemployment rate in the municipality is low (3.5%). Almost 80% of the economically active population have been leaving to work abroad (Germany, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Austria), but we have observed increased mobility also within the surrounding municipalities and towns (Bošelová 2019: 275–292).

Another differentiating factor is whether the municipality was classified as a village town during the previous Communist regime, i.e. whether it was considered a developing or extinguishing municipality (under the act from 1982). The municipalities, where various services developed in the past, such as business, healthcare, education, were selected, or it were municipalities annexed to a town village where, on the contrary, the development stagnated,

which also corresponded to the level of technical and economic infrastructure. These villages received financial support for their further development, however, the ones designated as extinguishing did not. After the transition to a market economy (1990), the municipalities with such a different level of civic amenities developed under different conditions. Given the existing local services to the population, this has also been translated in the growth or decline in the number of inhabitants.

To a certain extent, employment is also influenced by attained qualifications; what is positive is the predominance of full secondary vocational education with a school-leaving diploma or university education. These indicators have an impact on the number of employees in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sphere. In all municipalities, the least people are employed in the primary sphere, which gives a realistic picture of their non-agricultural character. Farming near the house and greenhouse growing of vegetables persists only to a limited extent. The sale of furniture at local market places is rare. For preserving the agricultural character of a municipality, the proximity of an urban centre appears to be a negative indicator. From the point of view of the economically active population, it is interesting that the number of entrepreneurs and trade licence holders carrying out industrial activities and providing third-sector services has been growing over the recent period.

### ***Activities in the field of tourism***

The business activities that we observed in the municipalities usually related to the development of domestic tourism, or are based on local production facilities up to modern small firms.

Cooperation within micro-regions is another significant development factor that brings, in addition to other benefits, the possibility of drawing money from regional funds or grant calls

by relevant foundations. The municipality of Malé Dvorníky is a positive example in this regard, being part of the Klátovské rámenko micro-region with the active use of the various possibilities offered by several foundations or the state budget, such as the financing of the unique project *Cycling Routes without Borders*, the objective of which was the construction of cycling routes in four Slovak micro-regions.

An important part of tourism development are accessible services. As far as catering facilities are concerned, they were mostly the weak points in all studied locations. The availability of accommodation was also a problem (except for two municipalities) in the ambitious idea of tourism development in the municipality.

In recent years, it has been in the interest of municipal self-governments to create places for rest and recreation within the municipality, providing space for social meetings in nature. However, sports facilities are neither planned landmarks within the studied localities nor a priority in tourism development. Some of them do have sports facilities, however, these are only intended for domestic citizens.

It can be concluded that one of the development factors in the field of tourism in the countryside is the interlinking of accommodation possibilities with local traditional architecture and a rural life-style, as well as the chance to get familiar with its specificities (private accommodation, eating local food products). The use of the potential of less settled regions, which are currently much sought for by tourists, has also appeared to be an important development incentive for the present-day countryside, which relates to departure from mass tourism with an emphasis on individual forms of enjoyment of leisure time. The low level of services represents a major barrier in the development rural tourism, mainly in the field of catering and accommodation, though it is one of the most important segments. The other identified major bar-

riers to development included: demographic development, poor transport infrastructure, stagnation or declining attractiveness of the municipality or region, poor promotion, poor engagement of municipality citizens, and the lack of opportunities for people's participation in the domestic tourism segment (e.g. youth, local communities, associations, and interest groups).

## CULTURAL AND SOCIAL LIFE, LOCAL CULTURAL HERITAGE<sup>30</sup>

The aim of this part is to explore cultural and social life activities from the point of view of human resources, available infrastructure, the impact of cultural and social events on social life in the municipality and the use of local cultural heritage as an inspiring source of activities in the field of culture. It is interesting to record not only continuously preserved phenomena understood as an incentive to realise local identity, but also as a representative article. These events are supported by local associations, activists, and local leaders. We focus not only on continuously preserved, but also revitalised elements. The research results are presented in that structure.

### *The importance of local institutions and personalities*

Human resources are a special factor of the cultural life of municipalities (mayor, priest, representatives of interest groups and cultural-social associations, societies, activists, etc.). The support of young creative people and, in regional and ethical education, of the elderly appeared to be an important development factor. In this context, the support of active people by the municipality representatives and citizens has been important. Creative people experienced in the implementation of diverse cultural and educational projects represent a strength of the municipalities. Tho-

rough knowledge of the region's cultural resources and support of cultural life were a strong competitive point in the Village of the Year competition as well as a sign of municipal development. It turned out that the creation of a job in the field of culture within the local self-government is important, though it is not very common in Slovakia. Initiatives to organise local events must not be based only on activists, if they are to be effective, but they must also enjoy institutional support and concurrence.

Local priests also contribute to the building of a community and to an active cultural and social life. In such municipalities, religiousness has a considerable impact on the local culture and on the general life-style, and this element is rated highly in the citizens' value system. Socio-cultural events often have an important religious component, or religious ceremonies form a part of them.

All municipalities have meeting rooms for pensioners (except for one), where pensioners do not have a separate institution or the need to associate. Another important indicator of municipal development are well-equipped schools and school areas offering pupils and the public appropriate cultural, educational, sports, and relaxation zones. As for sports facilities, municipality inhabitants can use the gyms of elementary schools, playgrounds, fitness centres, cycling routes, and winter ski slopes. All these are important meeting places for citizens and often serve as venues for cultural and social events.

In the studied municipalities, the local schools are perceived as the key institutions in which pupils obtain not only quality education but, through extracurricular activities, they have the opportunity to spend their leisure time in a meaningful way (development of further learning, creativity, technical, sports, and art skills, etc.). The formation of the relationship to the location and to its natural and cultural heritage and citizens is also important. The form of

presentation of the school and its pupils in various competitions and cultural-social events is essential. These opportunities are manifested in everyday as well as holiday-specific situations.

The reputation of the school increases when its activities reach beyond the school environment and when the school is involved in activities organised by the municipality (festivals, welcoming children to life, meeting with people celebrating their anniversaries, etc.). Our research confirms that rural schools are an important fundament for municipal development and that synergy between municipalities and schools is an indispensable investment in the young generation and in the settlement, as well as an important contribution to the overall cultural and social events in the municipality.<sup>31</sup> Local schools are perhaps the most important environment in which the traditional culture of the municipality or region are taught in an accessible form. Regional education, though approved by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic as a recommended complementary subject, is not exercised for various reasons in all municipalities.

The conditions for organising both regular and irregular cultural and social events in the municipality must be inevitably created in cooperation with the local institutions (municipal office and schools, elementary art schools, local leisure centres), interest groups (folklore, singing, theatre, dance, etc.), societies and associations (hunters, beekeepers, firefighters, senior people, youth, several sports clubs). Regular cultural events include balls and special carnival parties. Tourist events are also largely represented here, many of them having with a long tradition.

### ***Local cultural heritage and traditional culture phenomena***

can be designated as an important means of identification of individuals with an integration function within the local community. Cultural heritage contributes to the creation of social links

and networks. It can contribute to social and emotional tranquility and to the feeling of personal freedom and development, thus becoming part of one of the areas that determine the quality of life.<sup>32</sup> Elementary schools, elementary art schools, folklore groups, folk music bands, choirs, as well as active individuals – group leaders, outstanding singers, musicians, dancers or craftsmen – represent important local institutions that play an essential role in their preservation and presentation (Ambrózová – Krausová 2019; Košťalová 2019: 45-53). The representative function is played by the members of folklore groups who are currently the bearers of traditional culture. Their potential is also manifested in the collection of ethnographic materials and in the organisation of and involvement in activities.

In addition to continuously practiced or revitalised phenomena of traditional culture, there are also new types of events organised recently, such as the starting of the pre-Christmas season by lighting up the Christmas tree or the Advent wreath, or the joint municipal welcoming of the new year. There are several cultural events of this type, and their diversity reaches beyond the traditional patterns.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The launch of the evaluation and the Village of the Year prize were a very good and useful step. Municipalities were thus given the opportunity to reflect on their activities, to be awarded and recognised, and to present what they were doing. It is all the more valuable that, after 1989, the Slovak countryside was left exclusively on its own. Villages were harshly affected mainly by the transformation processes in agriculture, as well as recession in industrial production, which translated mainly in growing unemployment of the rural population.

The concept based on village towns and managed urbanisation stopped being in place, a dual system of public administration was created, and local self-governments became free to manage and direct their development. The free market, the lack of experience of the self-governments with the new situation, and the elimination of state dirigisme often led to uncontrolled developments. Not all municipalities were able to cope with this new situation, which helped many municipalities, while incurred long-term damages in others, the remedy of which required a lot of time and efforts.

The introduction of the Village Renewal Programme in 1997 (Government Resolution No. 222/97) and the subsequent Village of the Year competitions (since 2001) brought a breath of new possibilities for a systemic approach to the development of rural municipalities, their professional management and return to values, which undoubtedly contributed to the strengthening of their identity.

The experience and the result of the Village of the Year competition as the basic project premise offered opportunities for summarisation and analyses of the reasons for the success of municipalities in this competition and for preparing a proposal for recommendations to local self-governments in the countryside on how to direct and manage economic, social, and cultural development. Despite the fact that the awarded municipalities as well as the entire countryside are very diverse, with varying development conditions, there are still common features that led them to success.

## **General recommendations for rural villages**

### **a) Local economic development**

The experience shows that, in each territory, potential, sources, and capital that can be used for local economic development can be identified. What is primarily important is the geographical position of the municipality, what people and with what skills the municipality has, and what its opportunities as well as natural and historical conditions for economic activities are. Such traditional areas of economic activities in the countryside include agriculture, forestry, and tourism. These can be further linked to other services or crafts, such as transport, building, wood and agricultural products processing, carpentry, maintenance, and repairs, etc.

The new era brings new challenges as well as new opportunities for the recovery of local sources in the countryside. These challenges mainly relate to climate change, orientation on the green economy, circular economy, carbonless production, reduction of energy intensity, or the introduction of digitisation. All of them are areas suitable for the countryside, whether it is measures to increase the water retention capacity of the landscape, the use of biomass for energy purposes, waste recovery and recycling,

or the building of cycle routes for commuting to work or to use services.

For all these new opportunities, it is possible to utilise the existing human resources as well as local enterprises and institutions, and to create new job opportunities. It is an advantage for the countryside that new jobs are created not only for non-qualified people with lower qualifications, but also for high-qualified experts. It is an opportunity for keeping young and qualified people in the countryside and for stopping rural depopulation. The digitisation and electronisation of public services, as well as the possibilities of working from home along with cheaper housing in a healthy environment are another opportunity for how to keep and attract young and professional people to the countryside.

Another advantage for local economic development and employment is the existence of municipal enterprises. The development of the local economy is an opportunity to utilise the local potential for a higher quality life in the countryside and for both keeping people in the villages and attracting new young people.

### **b) Cultural and social life, and cultural heritage**

One of the key components of the development of municipalities is the cultural and social life of their inhabitants. Despite the strong external influence of mass culture and globalisation, it is necessary to appreciate the municipalities' effort to keep and meaningfully transform the cultural values of their communities. This reflects the good knowledge of cultural history. An inspiring source of several cultural and social events are traditional culture phenomena which represent an important local-identification as well as a local-representational article. They occur, for instance, on fixed, cyclically repeated dates or on the occasion of important life situations. The cultural calendar also includes revitalised as well as innovative events introducing new, current topics reflec-

ting on the current affairs. An important integration and representative role is played by “large” events in the form of municipal festivities and festivals (of cross-regional nature). Their cultural composition and dramaturgy are dependent on the creativity of local activists. It is positive when municipalities have a paid worker in the field of culture or sports or an Assembly for Civic Affairs which co-organises cultural and social life and conducts specific ceremonies.

Cultural and social events should be part of the activities of each municipality. They have a very positive impact not only on the strengthening of the coherence and identity of a community, but also on visits and tourism development. In addition, they form part of the process of socialisation (generational, of allochthonous inhabitants) and create the possibilities for active leisure and self-realisation, which significantly contributes also to a higher evaluation of the quality of life.

Cultural heritage is one of the key potentials of tourism development for many municipalities. They therefore pay increased attention to its preservation, in which citizens are also being actively involved. Unfortunately, local sources are not sufficient for the preservation and reconstruction of many historically valuable traditional architectonic objects; nevertheless, in many cases, municipalities seek to preserve, on their own or with the support of project subsidies, unique cultural and historical values presenting the identity of the locations and their respective communities. It is on this basis that the building of their image stands. In this context, they also pay attention to improving public spaces, decoration during holidays, as well as to the extension of green areas through the creation of parks. An important part of the cultural identity is communication and promotion within municipalities through the placement of information boards or by means of the local public address system, or more widely, through monographs,

cultural and promotional videos, music carriers, or by using websites and social networks.

The municipality's cooperation with schools in the field of education of the young generation and support of leisure activities also contributes to the strengthening of the sense of belonging and cultural identity. Another positive factor is the use of school areas and sports facilities by the general public.

Globalisation and the impacts of modernisation also had a negative impact in the building culture and in the architectonic appearance of municipalities. The municipalities were unable to prevent new formations in the construction of family houses, which has resulted in the disruption of their architectural character.

### **c) Community and leadership**

The cohesion and strength of the community and a good leader have a major impact on the success of municipalities. The building of a community has many forms and depends also on the location of the municipality, the structure of its inhabitants, and their active engagement in public life. The basis of a rural community is the family, relatives, and neighbours, where such mutual relationships are still alive and active. The key points of the strengthening of community are the school, the church, and local associations.

Schools are important in cultivating local values among the young generation as well as in the introduction of new activities and trends in the life of the municipality. The church plays an important role in supporting family (*family and faith keep the village together*) and youth, mainly by organising leisure activities (sports, singing, music), and is less engaged in social events other than church holidays. The church is a place where otherwise non-communicating groups of inhabitants meet as well. The church does not always sufficiently use its potential for the building of cooperation and partnership. The main participation of the church in

the social life of a municipality is manifested by interconnecting important events in the life of a municipality with events within the parish or the church assembly.

The more associations are in a village, the more diverse the community is and the more competent and engaged leaders it has. They are the motor of organising social, cultural, sport, educational and environmental events that enhance the community and move it forward. Municipalities are aware of the role of the societies and associations, support their activities, and provide space for these purposes.

The main role of local self-government in strengthening the community is to ensure safety, inclusion, support, and assistance to the socially weaker, vulnerable, and excluded groups of the population – in particular the elderly, the disabled, and the Roma. Given the unfavourable demographic development, higher average age and the outflow of young people, the problem for municipalities is to cover the rising costs of social services and the safety of the population.

A healthy and successful community is not only the result of good relationships between the school, the church, businesses, associations, and various minorities, but is primarily the result of the efforts of an open self-government. An open self-government supports such mutual communication, creates the conditions for it, and engages them in the social activities within the municipality. And this is often primarily a mirror of the main leader of the municipality – the mayor. The mayor is not only a natural authority elected by the citizens, but must also have the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to obtain funds for the purposes of development of the community and missing infrastructure.

### **Partnership and cooperation**

Partnership and cooperation have two dimensions – internal and external. The external one is reflected in the quality of the

community and its management. A well-functioning and successful self-government is the result of cooperation between local actors and their involvement in the development of the municipality.

The main tool of municipality development is the Municipality Development Programme (Economic Development and Social Development Programme – EDSDR), which is successful only if all local actors are involved in it. Only then it becomes their common intellectual property through which they can contribute to its implementation. It is a big mistake if the municipalities have the EDSDR prepared by a private company, without engaging in it the public and the local entities that are thus not involved directly in the implementation of the municipality development programme.

Another important document on community development, prepared on the basis of the principle of partnership cooperation, is the Community Plan. Pursuant to Article 83 of Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services, the municipality prepares the community plan in line with the applicable National Social Services Development Priorities, while taking into account the local specificities and the needs of the citizens in the field of social services. The document defines the conditions for the promotion of community development and social services in line with the needs of the target groups that are directly involved in its creation.

However, municipalities are not able to deal in a comprehensive manner with many of the problems related to municipality development within their respective territories – in particular in the field of economic development, tourism development, and employment. Municipalities therefore form joint associations of either inter-municipal cooperation (micro-regions), or multi-sectoral cooperation for local development – local action groups or for tourism development – regional tourism organisations.

Through these partnership structures, they are better able to obtain funds for the development of their territories and for the creation of new job opportunities. These funds are implemented in line with the joint development programme created in partnership between the members. There is a division of labour between municipalities, businesses, and civic associations in the implementation of joint development projects. Where the LEADER approach is applied, there is a significant qualitative improvement of cooperation and professional growth of local self-governments.

### **Specific recommendations**

#### **a) For municipalities with Roma communities**

The citizens of Roma nationality are equal inhabitants of the municipality, and the local government should use their potential by involving the Roma community in the development of the municipality. Slovak governments have already invested considerable funds in dealing with the Roma issues, however, the results are manifested only sporadically. The reason is that schematic nationwide solutions are applied, while neglecting local specificities and the role of the local community, as a result of which the sustainability of the support tools is not ensured, and the actual local causes of the problems are not being solved. Original local solutions to the relationship between the majority and the minority are dependent primarily on the elimination of prejudices both between the majority and the minority population.

The dealing with Roma issues is highly dependent on the specific local relationships and conditions in each community (municipality). The key to cooperation between the majority and the minority and to problem resolution are communication and the identification of needs, followed by a joint proposal of the solution into which both the Roma and the general population are

engaged. An important factor for a successful communication and solution is technical assistance to be ensured by the state. Technical assistance is very important not only for a well-functioning mutual communication and the creation of a joint programme, but also for the creation of projects and their implementation.

The only right way is the inclusion of the Roma minority in the community not only when it comes to the involvement of the Roma in the work process, but also in social and cultural events, mainly in the form of dealing with these issues and the quality of housing.

### **b) Suburban municipalities**

Suburban municipalities struggle with two contradictory phenomena: a positive growth of the population and enhanced economic development of the municipality on the one hand, and negative consequences not only within the disrupted identity and nature of the municipality, but also within community coherence on the other hand.

The municipality can be protected against gross interventions by developers that disrupt the nature of the municipality only by a good zoning plan with good building regulations and the willingness of the municipality to comply with it. The key role of the self-government is to create the conditions for bringing the original population close to the new settlers. The most effective this is done is through events that involve both groups of the population. It is appropriate that also new-settlers begin organising events not only for their community, but also for the municipality as a whole. It is, however, a long-term play, and it will last at least one generation until the relationships within a community become harmonised. What is worse are the damages caused to the urban development concept of the municipality and its identity. Coping with this issue in the future is a challenge not only for urban planners.

It is obvious that suburban municipalities are losing their original character and features, but have not yet created a new form and thus find themselves in a conflicting situation.

#### **c) For municipalities in lagging regions**

The major challenge for municipalities in lagging regions and for dead-end municipalities, especially small ones, is to keep the inhabitants in them and to prevent the outflow of young people. It is a very difficult task and there is only one way leading there – by increasing their attractiveness. This can be ensured only by strengthening identity and of the cultural heritage, associated with the education of the young generation, assessment of the local potential for new economic activities related to the green economy, and by involving the municipality in cooperation and partnerships between municipalities. It is appropriate if the municipality can find its unique specific function in such partnership and create conditions for housing for specific interest groups that seek a return to nature, healthy diet, and a natural way of life.

#### **d) For municipalities in developed regions**

Developed regions provide more suitable conditions for municipal development. The territory itself, which involves several engines of development, is a prerequisite not only for sufficient job opportunities, but also a reason why people do not leave the municipality. There is even an interest in moving there. This raises the need for the construction of new flats. It depends on the quality of management of the local government how it can use these opportunities and prepare lands for new construction. In these municipalities, as well as in suburban ones, main attention must be paid to maintaining the nature and character of the municipality and to the creation of the conditions for community cohesion.

### **Summary of recommendations for municipalities**

- to build a strong local economy by using the local potential and new opportunities;
- to preserve, enhance, and promote both tangible and intangible cultural heritage;
- to raise the young generation to values and sound local patriotism;
- to strengthen the local community and its cohesion, and to support the activities of associations and leaders' growth;
- to involve all target groups in the joint planning of municipal development;
- to engage in inter-municipal and multi-sectoral cooperation and, in within such partnership, build a specific position and function in line with its development programme;
- to cooperate with cities in the coordination of public services and the creation of job opportunities;
- to elect a mayor who knows and is able to identify local resources and has the potential to implement such recommendations.

### **Proposal for recommendations to the Government and the Parliament**

#### **a) In the field of legislation and politics**

It is paradoxical that even if we are the second most rural country of the European Union, the institute of the “countryside” is non-existent in our legislation. This means that we do not keep any statistics of the countryside, have no information about it, and cannot even take any follow-up measures. The countryside is left to “natural” development and has experienced a highly turbulent period over the past thirty years.

Unemployment and Roma issues are perceived the most negatively in the countryside. In addition, unfavourable demographic

developments are manifested, and the countryside is gradually dying out, which threatens the sustainability of the country's quality.

For these reasons, politicians should pay legislative and political attention mainly to:

- the legislative and statistical legitimisation of the countryside;
- the settlement of land ownership;
- the re-opening of the issue of the “hillside inhabitants act”;
- to legislatively prevent large employers from employing people who are holders of a trade licence instead of regular employment;
- to introduce the obligation of disposing of a binding opinion issued by the architect when the Building Act is amended;
- to adapt the norms in the education system to the specific position of small municipalities;
- to eliminate the negative image of the Roma community in the general population's minds.

#### **b) In the field of rural development**

Thanks to our membership and support by the European Union, the state has in its hands a unique support tool for rural development – community-led local development (CLLD) based on the LEADER approach principles. A huge advantage of this tool is the support of cooperation between the sectors, a joint integrated and systematic approach to territorial development, and the promotion of co-responsibility for the development of one's own region. Unfortunately, it is an unwanted child in Slovakia, and the government rather prefers the approach based on central redistribution of support, which is often far from the objective needs of such territory. The government and the agriculture ministry should definitely pay increased attention to this tool and allocate

to the support of community-led local development of the countryside at least as much funds as the government grants to dealing with Roma issues.

From the point of view of the socio-economic and cultural development of the countryside, it is necessary to support youth interest in the establishment of farms, interest in the implementation of business plans, as well as cultural and social activities (cultural and sports infrastructure, events) by means of special-purpose grant funds.

In addition to systemic and much-needed support for endogenous rural development and specific targeted subsidies, a number of accumulated problems need to be addressed. Their main cause is the outflow of young and educated people from the countryside, which causes its gradual dying-out. The situation is bad mainly when it comes to the availability of basic services. In many municipalities, there is not even a shop or a pub, and the cancellation of schools in small municipalities may lead to their definitive end...

In addition, what would significantly contribute to the revival of the countryside is free internet, and not at twice the price of the internet in the city, even if implemented from public funds... It is important for keeping young and educated people in the countryside, mainly in connection with the electrification of public services and the possibility of working from home.

On the opposite side, there are municipalities which are unable to prevent developers' pressure and have no specialised assistance and support. What is absent is the position of "district" architects who would have legitimate powers to decide on new construction, relieving mayors from taking decisions in this professional area.

The countryside shapes the character of our country and is the bearer of its values and identity, deserving maximum attention and support from the state.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> APVV: Agency for the support of research and development, project “Socio-cultural capital of successful municipalities as a source of sustainable development of the Slovak countryside” (APVV-16-0155).

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see <https://www.obnovadediny.sk/o-sutazi/>

<sup>3</sup> As well as other criteria subordinated to the fact that the Village of the Year programme is an international European action.

<sup>4</sup> A part of this chapter was published in the *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnography* journal, 67, 2019, 3, 251- 258.

<sup>5</sup> Including other criteria subordinated to the fact that the Village of the Year programme is an international European action as well.

<sup>6</sup> The studies were published in the *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnography* magazine 67, 2019, 3, 251–324.

<sup>7</sup> The SWOT analysis defines the strengths and weaknesses of the municipality, as well as the opportunities and threats in selected thematic areas according to one’s choice.

<sup>8</sup> Source: file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/1%20APVV%202017-2021/Soblahov/PR-Soblahov-2015\_2023\_SCHVALENY\_na-web.pdf

<sup>9</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Rusnák, P. Successful Municipalities and Their Urbanistic Development. In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 35–78.

<sup>10</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Ambrózová, J. – Krišková, Z. Building culture, public space, and environmental approaches to local development processes. In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 79–103.

<sup>11</sup> The authors cite: Darulová – Košťalová – Krišková: 2020.

<sup>12</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Bitušíková, A. – Beňušková, Z. Local community and regional partnerships. In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka*

na Slovensku (*Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia*). Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 104–128.

<sup>13</sup> The authors cite: Moravanská 2009: 381.

<sup>14</sup> The authors cite: Falfán – Falfánová 2019: 72.

<sup>15</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Bahna, V. The participation of churches in social life and community development. In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 129–165.

<sup>16</sup> The author cites: Podolinská 2008, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> The author cites: Hillery 1955; Heller 1989; Wellman – Leighton 1979; Buss et al. 2002.

<sup>18</sup> The author cites: Flora – Flora – Gasteyer 2016.

<sup>19</sup> The author cites: Dokecki – Newbrough – O’Gorman 2001; Miers – Fisher 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Autori odkazujú na: Csontos 2009, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> The author cites, among others: Dunbar 2017.

<sup>22</sup> During the term of the current priest, several reconstructions have been carried out, such as repair of the church, restoration of the main altar, landscaping around the church, reconstruction of the calvary, etc. Similar reconstruction activities are to a certain extent taking place in each of the studied municipalities.

<sup>23</sup> The author cites: Beňušková 2013; Jágerová 2020.

<sup>24</sup> In the municipality with 3,299 inhabitants, the first communion is attended by around 50 children each year.

<sup>25</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Hrustič, T. Forms of co-existence with Roma communities and their involvement in social life). In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 166–189.

<sup>26</sup> The author cites: Škobla – Csomor – Filadelfiová 2018: 35.

<sup>27</sup> The author cites: Bourdieu 1991.

<sup>28</sup> The author cites: Mušíinka 2012.

<sup>29</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Bošelová, M. – Darulová, J. Cultural and social life, local cultural heritage In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 190–222.

<sup>30</sup> This part was written based on the chapter: Jágerová, M. – Košťalová, K. Cultural and Social Life, Local Cultural Heritage. In *Dobré miesto pre život. Dediny roka na Slovensku (Good Place for Life. Villages of the Year in Slovakia)*. Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2021, pp. 223–249.

<sup>31</sup> The authors cite: Darulová – Košťalová – Krišková 2020: 190.

<sup>32</sup> The authors cite: Beňušková 2019.

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