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Participatory Budgeting: Latest Development in Czechia and Slovakia

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Abstract:

The existence of active and participating citizens is an essential part of a democratic society. In recent years, the concept of political participation has expanded, and new ways of involving individuals and groups in community or local decision-making processes have emerged. Participatory budgeting is one of the ways citizens participate in public decision-making. This research provides a comparative analysis on development of selected factors influencing the sustainability of participatory budgeting in regional cities (urban regional centres) in Czechia and Slovakia. The analysis is complemented by case studies in two cities that run the participatory budgeting the longest (Brno in Czechia, Banská Bystrica in Slovakia). The findings indicate relatively low interest in participatory budgeting in both countries and conflicting goals for ensuring sustainability, e.g. development in the amount allocated for PB. The paper summarises the latest developments of PB in the analysed urban regional centres. It adds to the knowledge of this tool in the context of the Central and Eastern Europe region and helps policymakers focus on important factors influencing

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the sustainability of participatory budgeting.

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1. Introduction

Participatory budgeting (PB) originated in Porto Alegre through an experimental process where the then-ruling party sought to help poorer citizens obtain higher levels of public spending and address financial constraints to give citizens a direct role in government operations (Wampler, 2000). Gradually, it became apparent that participatory budgeting could be a powerful public policy tool and has become standard practice in many countries worldwide. Participatory budgeting arrived relatively late in Central and Eastern Europe, more than 20 years after its inception in Porto Alegre. However, it quickly gained popularity and became one of the tools of citizen participation with a rather specific characteristic: participatory budgeting involves citizens at the centre of financial decision-making, allowing them to participate in the public budgets of local governments and to influence fiscal transparency (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023; Zawadzka-Pąk, 2021).

Participatory budgeting was introduced in Czechia in 2014. The first city to implement the idea of participatory budgeting was Prague 7 (one of the city districts of Prague), which has long sought to encourage citizen participation and support their active involvement in the district's activities. Since 2017, they have been trying to involve young people in their activities by organising an election for a student mayor. Candidates are elected from among the pupils of the last two years of primary school. The winner then receives a budget of CZK 50,000. The student council can propose projects for young people. In 2016, other city districts of Prague and other cities, e.g., Semily or Ostrava, expressed the desire to implement participatory budgeting. The introduction of participatory budgeting in 2017 in Brno, the second largest city in Czechia, where participatory budgeting is set at the level of the Brno city budget and not at the level of individual city districts, as is the case in e.g. Prague or Ostrava, can be considered significant. The popularity of participatory budgeting has gradually increased in Czechia, and in 2018, 38 municipalities implemented PB.

According to the results of Sedmihradská et al. (2022), which analysed PB in Czechia between 2014 and 2019, participatory budgeting implemented in Czechia is associated with several advantages. It improves collaboration between active citizens and civil society organisations and promotes creative or original proposals. On the other hand, the participation of citizens in participatory budgeting is still lower than the participation in the general election. However, this is not the only negative of participatory budgeting. Other potential negative aspects of participatory budgeting detected in Czechia include Human dignity (in the sense of improving the situation of disabled or elderly people), Sustainability, Citizen involvement, Openness, Secrecy, Compromise, Integrity and Robustness, see Zawadzka-Pąk and Tomášková (2019). In Czechia, participatory budgeting is possible in big cities and small villages. Every municipality has a unique model of participatory budgeting because it is not regulated by law in Czechia; for this reason, every municipality has its own rules. It allows creativity in its design. Since 2015, more than 122 municipalities have tried this tool in Czechia. A drop in interest could be seen in the COVID-19 years, but since 2022, the number of municipalities involved in participatory budgets is increasing again (Kukučková et al., 2024).

In Slovakia, the initiative to create PB manifested itself in 2011. Bratislava was the first city to implement a participatory budget in 2011, followed by Ružomberok in 2013 and Banská Bystrica in 2014. The case of Bratislava was specific - in the first year (2011) the money for PB (€15,000) was raised from sponsors, not from the public budget. The process of implementing participatory budgeting started thanks to active citizens and the NGO Utópia, who together raised the money, established cooperation with the city council and involved other citizens (Klimovský et al., 2021). The Ružomberok PB was initiated by activists from the local civic association Tvorivý rozvoj (Creative Development), which was personally linked to the Bratislava-based civic association Utópia at the time. Consultations with the citizens of Ružomberok on participatory budgeting were already underway in 2012. In 2013, after a meeting between the Utópia CSO and the authorities of the City of Ružomberok, the first year of participatory budgeting was approved. For the project's pilot year, € 5,000 was allocated from the city budget (Džinić et al., 2016). Banská Bystrica started PB in 2014, and the initiators at that time were the NGO Via Altera, again in cooperation with the Utópia NGO and one member of the city council (Murray Svidroňová & Klimovský, 2022). Banská Bystrica has continued participatory budgeting to this day, so we can say that it is the city with the longest duration of PB in Slovakia. Participatory budgeting projects may have started with a somewhat uncertain and experimental beginning in Slovakia, but more and more municipalities have implemented the innovative system over time. In 2023, we could observe around 70 municipalities using participatory budgeting.

The participatory budgeting process is not uniform, even in the conditions of Slovak and Czech municipalities. There is a wide variation in the implementation of participatory budgeting processes - some municipalities have well-developed processes, while others have problems implementing PB. Political support levels also vary - in municipalities where local leaders support PB, processes tend to be more structured and consistent. Differences in the financial resources allocated to PB projects also contribute to inconsistency. Financially healthier municipalities can dedicate more significant funds and resources to PB purposes, while others with limited budgets face difficulties sustaining participatory budgeting processes (Nemec & Špaček, 2017). The challenges of participatory budgeting motivated conducting this research to map the latest developments of PB in Czechia and Slovakia, focusing on the selected factors influencing the sustainability of PB in the regional urban centres. These two countries were selected based on their shared past: until 1993, they were part of the Czechoslovak Republic. After a political agreement and peaceful split up, the countries built on the shared legacy yet pursued their own public administration reforms, including implementing various innovations such as participatory budgeting. Since the first cases of participatory budgeting emerged in 2010, the process is still relatively new in both countries, and the existing body of literature is more focused on the implementation of participatory budgeting. This study adds to the knowledge on latest development of participatory budgeting in regional urban centres by addressing the factors that might influence the sustainability of PB, especially after the turbulent times of COVID-19 when many local governments faced financial austerity and were forced to interrupt or stop participatory budgeting.

2. Participatory budgeting – implementation and sustainability

When defining participatory budgeting, we do not find a uniform formulation, as its forms of implementation and use vary and are adapted to the specific localities in which it is used. A general definition is provided by UN-Habitat (2004), which is the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, where participatory budgeting is defined as: "a mechanism (or process) through which citizens make or contribute to decisions about the use of all or part of available public resources." Although definitions for participatory budgeting may differ to some extent, many authors (e.g. Sintomer et al., 2012; Milosavljević et al., 2023; Klimovský et al., 2024) agree that participatory budgeting is an innovation in public financial management that has become a popular tool for engaging citizens in decision-making processes related to the allocation of public resources. This concept, which began to develop in Latin America in the 1980s, has gradually found its way to countries worldwide, becoming a symbol of democracy and participatory governance (De Vries et al., 2021). The participatory budgeting process provides a direct opportunity for citizens to decide on a portion of public funds allocated to local projects. It is a process that increases transparency, accountability and trust between governing bodies and citizens. This approach to budgeting brings many benefits, such as increased citizen engagement, improved resource distribution, better planning and increased efficiency of public investments (Wampler, 2012; Juza, 2019; Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021; Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023). Thus, the participatory budgeting process aims, among other things, to increase the transparency and accountability of local government governing bodies and the level of civic engagement. Local governments often face various challenges in implementing and sustaining this democratic innovation.

Implementing PB requires a significant initial investment and a large amount of resources. Many local governments operate under severe budgetary constraints and thus may have difficulty allocating sufficient funds for participatory budgeting purposes. Limited financial resources and budget constraints often mean municipalities cannot fund all proposed projects, leading to disappointment among citizens (Lerner & Secondo, 2012). Sustaining high levels of civic engagement and participation is equally challenging. Initial enthusiasm gradually wanes, and if citizens do not see concrete immediate results, they do not perceive the process as necessary. There is a need for continuous communication and the creation of feedback mechanisms (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). Political support is also critical. The effectiveness of participatory budgeting processes often depends on the commitment of local leaders and the integration of PB into the formal political structures of local government. Continued political and financial support is essential for the sustainability of PB, and maintaining political and administrative momentum, especially in the face of political or leadership changes, is key to the success of PB (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Abers, 2001). Becerra (2011) in his study states that inconsistency in how processes were implemented resulted in confusion among citizens. The variability in participatory budgeting processes was mainly due to changes in local government leadership, which further led to changes in PR practices and priorities. The inconsistency of the processes created distrust among citizens, who perceived the process as unstable and unreliable. The lack of standardised procedures has resulted in considerable variability in implementation practices. Inconsistencies in administrative support and coordination can constitute significant barriers to implementing PB effectively. These inconsistencies often lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of PB, as citizens face different rules that complicate their efforts to engage in the participatory budgeting process and create misunderstandings (Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2012).

Sustainability factors

The Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries share a rather experimental approach and still lack experience and information in participatory budgeting. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are still many unanswered questions about the diffusion, implementation and sustainability of this democratic innovation (Klimovský et al., 2021).

The factors influencing the sustainability of participatory budgeting have been the subject of much research. Among the factors of participatory budgeting sustainability that several authors have investigated are budget transparency (Ríos et al., 2016), population, education, income (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014; Ebdon, 2008), economic development, the municipality's resources, budget flexibility (Liao & Zhang, 2012; Raich, 2005) or political determinants such as political affiliation or mayoral experience (Klun & Benčina, 2021; Burkšienė et al., 2022). A theoretical basis for aggregating the determinants of the implementation and sustainability of PB is offered by Murray Svidroňová et al. (2024) or Balázová et al. (2022), who, based on a literature search, suggest that the factors influencing the sustainability of participatory budgeting can be grouped into the following three categories:

1. Social and political factors: social justice, socio-economic development, culture,

level of administrative maturity, level of political decentralization, voter turnout, level of experience of policymakers, the political affiliation of the mayor/council leader, and transparency of policy decisions on public resources.
2. Economic factors: financial condition of the local government, budget division, budget process, economic crises or large-scale crises with significant economic impacts, uncertainty.
3. Organisational and institutional factors: use of information technology, voting methods, formal integration into the overall structure of the public budget, (non-)existence of participatory budgeting legislation.

In this paper, we focus on selected factors from these groups, mapping their latest development in regional urban centres in Czechia and Slovakia, namely size of the municipality (social factor), financial condition (health) of the municipality measured by the level of debt per capita and funds allocated to PB (economic factors) and number of votes (organisational factor).

Size of the municipality

Analysed regional urban centres vary in size, ranging from 21k to 284k in population. Sintomer et al. (2016) emphasised that smaller municipalities, as opposed to larger ones, often have higher levels of citizen participation due to communities with stronger social ties and a higher level of trust in the governing bodies of the municipality. This diversity can enrich the participatory budgeting process, but local governments need to implement targeted strategies for underrepresented communities to ensure the long-term sustainability of PB (Fung & Wright, 2001). The above can result in a more effective implementation of PB and a higher likelihood of citizen engagement and cooperation. On the other hand, Wampler and Hartz-Karp (2012) argue that smaller municipalities have a higher likelihood of successful PB sustainability in terms of faster and more flexible participatory budgeting processes due to a less complex administrative system. Also, smaller municipalities and communities may benefit from higher levels of social cohesion - smaller municipalities often have stronger community ties, which can contribute to the sustainability of PB (Cabannes & Lipietz, 2018). The simplicity of managing the participatory budgeting process and the easier logistics of organising it in smaller municipalities may also increase its sustainability (Cabannes, 2004).

Financial condition of the municipality

Ganuza and Baiocchi (2012) concluded regarding financial health that economic conditions and budget constraints have an impact on the sustainability of participatory budgeting, and financially healthier municipalities are more likely to implement PB as they offer greater flexibility to reallocate finances according to the needs of the community. Sintomer et al. (2012) also argues that sufficient financial resources are essential for participatory budgeting initiatives as resources in financially healthier municipalities are readily available. Financial stability enables funding for PB projects and thus can sustain citizen interest and participation over the long term (Wampler, 2012). Local governments with higher levels of debt may face changes and budget cuts. This financial uncertainty can undermine participatory budgeting processes and reduce effectiveness (Sintomer et al., 2016). Financially stable local governments can invest in the administrative and operational resources needed to manage participatory budgeting processes. Adequate funding for administrative resources ensures a smooth PB process, which is critical for its sustainability (Peixoto & Fox, 2016).

Funds for participatory budgeting

Sintomer et al. (2008) point out that high initial allocations for PB can raise public expectations, which, if not met over time, can lead to reduced trust and participation. Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) highlight that economic crises mainly affect the sustainability of PB initiatives with high budget allocations. Wampler (2012) suggests that high allocations for participatory budgeting can strain municipal budgets, which can further lead to problems in the sustainability of PB in the long run. When politicians perceive the PB process as an ineffective tool, there can be a decline in political and administrative support for the process. A possible sign of the reduced intensity of the PB process is decreased funds allocated to PB projects. This decrease can be measured as the change in the absolute amount of PB funds or the change in the amount of PB funds as a percentage of the total municipal expenditure. Fewer financial resources for PB may further demotivate citizens from participating in the PB process (Kukučková et al., 2024).

Number of voters

An interesting perspective is provided by Allegretti and Antunes (2014), who argues that local government needs to provide citizens with information on why some projects were rejected and others supported. The above can lead to participatory frustration, a term Fernández-Martínez et al. (2020) coined in response to unsuccessful participation in PB. Font et al. (2018) state that it is challenging to persuade those excluded that their ideas should have received less funding than those approved. In turn, this might lead to lower participation in PB in submitted projects and a lower participation rate in the voting phase of PB (Kukučková et al., 2024). As such, the number of submitted versus the number of approved projects and the number of voters for PB projects can influence the sustainability of PB. The organization of the PB process is important also from the clear communication point of view, as well as from enabling mixed methods of voting for projects (physical, on-line).

3. Methodology

This paper aims to analyse the latest developments of PB in Czechia and Slovakia, focusing on the selected factors influencing the sustainability of PB in the regional urban centres. Based on the objective, we set two research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How have selected factors related to participatory budgeting evolved in regional urban centres since its introduction?

RQ2: What are the differences of participatory budgeting process in Brno and Banska Bystrica?

In the first part, we use a review analysis of selected factors that could impact the sustainability of PB in the sample of all regional urban centres in Czechia and Slovakia, except for the capitals. The capitals are not included in the analysis as these have numerous districts, and the amount allocated for PB differs dramatically from district to district, which would distort the analysis of the determinants´ development in regional urban centres. Based on the literature review, we focus on mapping the development of the following important factors that influence sustainability of PB:

- Size of the municipality
- Financial health measured by the level of debt per capita
- Amount of money allocated for PB (as a share on total budget)
- Number of projects submitted
- Number of projects supported
- Amount of voters/votes

The analysed regional urban centres samples are described in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1:

Research sample for Czechia

Urban centres	Size	PB started	PB terminated (if)	Amount for PB as a share of total budget
Brno	400 566	2017	-	0.15% - 0.21%
České Budějovice	97 377	2020	-	0.19% - 0.38%
Hradec Králové	93 906	2024	-	0.33%
Jihlava	53 986	-	-	-
Karlovy Vary	49 353	-	-	-
Liberec	107 982	2021	-	0.19-0.24%
Olomouc	102 293	-	-	-
Ostrava*	284 765	2016, 2020	-	-
Pardubice**	92 362	2024	-	-

Plzeň ***	185 599	2020, 2023, 2024	-	-
Ústí nad Labem	91 342	2024	-	0.05%
Zlín	255	2020	-	0.33%-0.43%

* Participatory projects in Ostrava are only operational in three districts, namely Ostrava-South (since 2016), Ostrava-Poruba (since 2016) and Moravská Ostrava and Přívoz (since 2020), and have not yet been introduced in the remaining districts. Each district has different conditions, deadlines, and amounts, so it is impossible to assess Ostrava as a whole.
** Only the Pardubice 5 urban district; the remaining districts do not have participatory budgets.
*** In Plzeň, three districts are involved in participatory budgets (Plzeň 1 from 2024, Plzeň 3 from 2023 and Plzeň 4 from 2020)

Source: Authors' own, 2025

Table 2:
Research sample for Slovakia

Urban centres	Size	PB started	PB terminated (if)	Amount for PB as a share of total budget
Banská Bystrica	77 719	2014	-	0.03%-0.05%
Košice - Sídlisko KVP*	21 763	2020	2024	0.77%-1.10%
Košice - Západ*	36 779	2019	-	2.28%-3.32%
Nitra	76 028	2018	2021	0.06%-0.13%
Prešov	84 824	2024	-	n.a.
Trenčín**	54 679	-	-	-
Trnava	63 803	2016	2020	0.07-0.08%
Žilina***	82 656	-	-	-

* Košice, as a regional city, has 239 171 inhabitants, but only these two districts have implemented PB. One of them (KVP), due to non-payment of share taxes from the city of Košice and poor financial situation at the beginning of 2024, suspended the implementation of projects in 2024 by resolution of the local council. In the same way, the whole participatory budgeting has been suspended; no new edition was announced in 2024.
** Trenčín, as a municipality, has not implemented PB, but the Trenčín region has had PB running since 2017; in this regional PB, all legal entities, individuals, NGOs, and even local governments with a seat in the Trenčín region can apply with a project proposal.
*** Žilina states on the city's website that they have a participatory budget; there are no further details. After e-mail communication with the city, it turned out that they conduct participation as follows: "We deal with citizens' involvement and getting feedback in specific projects of the city through the city councillors, who are allocated funds (both current and capital expenditure), and within the framework of priorities they are also implemented. Another form of citizen involvement in projects is pre-announced meetings with citizens separately for each major project (e.g. revitalisation of inner blocks, squares, mobilities, and the like). There are also surveys and questionnaires with citizens, which the city addresses through its web portal https://zilina.sk/podnet/" (Head of the Economic Department of the City of Žilina).

Source: Authors' own, 2025

The second part of the analysis employs a qualitative case study method (Yin, 2009). We illustrate the process of PB using two cities as examples. The cities were selected because they have the longest running PB without any interruption in the countries: Brno in Czechia and Banská Bystrica in Slovakia.

4. Results

In this part, we present the results of our analysis. First, we discuss the factors influencing PB, and then we describe the case studies of selected urban centres.

4.1 Trend developments in selected factors influencing participatory budgeting

Tables 1 - 2 in the Methodology section and tables 3 - 4 in this section show the following development trends for selected factors in Czechia and Slovakia.

There are 12 regional towns in Czechia (excluding the capital). Six regional cities have tried PB from the position of the whole city (not just city districts). The regional cities of Ostrava, Pardubice and Plzeň are an exception; only some city districts are involved in PB. Unlike Slovakia, where a city has introduced PB, it has not been abolished. Czechia is lagging Slovakia, as the first PB was introduced in the municipality of Ostrava, which introduced it in 2016. However, from a city-wide perspective, the first PB was introduced in Brno in 2017. The amount allocated to PB is mainly increasing. However, proportionally, the amount going to PB is low concerning the total city budget expenditure (it does not even account for 0.5% of the total budget (České Budějovice (CB) oscillates at 0.27%, Hradec Králové (HK) at 0.3%, Liberec (LI) at 0.2%, Ústí nad Labem at 0.05% and Zlín (ZL) at 0.35%). For Zlín, there is a noticeable decrease in the amount allocated to PB concerning the city's total expenditure. It is not true that smaller cities spent less, and larger cities spent more of the funds allocated to PB in absolute terms during the period under review. Interestingly, cities of similar size have spent similar amounts on PB in recent years (CB, HK, LI, ZL). Ústí nad Labem spends more per capita (Table 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the number of projects submitted. The lowest number of projects was submitted during the COVID-19 period. However, the number of projects approved is in units compared to the proposals and is on a downward trend. Voting participation tends to increase but is still relatively low, accounting for only a few percent of citizens who vote on PB projects. However, it should be noted that the absolute number of votes cannot be compared, but the number of citizens involved in voting should be analysed. During the COVID-19 period, it was only possible to vote online. However, it is now possible to vote in person again at public meetings, as stated in the Principles of Participatory Budgeting of the Statutory City of Brno. The indebtedness of the regional cities is by no means high. The three most indebted cities

(HK, Ústí and Liberec) have PB in place, while, for example, the least indebted cities (Jihlava, Karlovy Vary) do not have PB in place (Table 3).

There are 7 regional cities in Slovakia (excluding the capital city). Three regional cities (Banská Bystrica, Nitra and Trnava) have tried PB from the position of the whole city (not just city districts). The regional city of Košice is an exception; two city districts were involved in PB, and in 2024, PB was completed in the city district Sídlisko KVP. Two of the three regional cities that implemented PB decided not to continue PB (Nitra and Trnava). For Nitra, it is possible to speculate that the reason for the cancellation was the COVID-19 pandemic, but not for Trnava. In Trnava, they have transformed PB into the "Plan the City - Move the Place" project, which they see as an innovative participatory process involving residents in deciding the city's priorities. In the pilot biennium 2022/2023, the concept focused on public spaces. "Plan the City - Move the Place," created by transforming participatory budgeting during the pandemic, allowed residents to submit ideas for improving public spaces, from which 54 project proposals were selected. City staff added 19 projects from existing plans. Banská Bystrica is an exception among the regional cities, as it was the first to participate in PB in 2014 and continues to participate in PB continuously. As mentioned above, Žilina is a specific city as it has a website indicating that it is implementing PB, but its concept of participation is different (Table 3).

Table 3:

Development of selected factors influencing the sustainability of PB in Czechia

Urban centres	Number of projects submitted								Number of projects supported							
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Brno	218	133	114	134	124	109	128	105	16	11	14	11	13	7	7	7
České Budějovice	x	x	x	51	68	37	28	51	x	x	x	9	11	11	5	5
Hradec Králové	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	49	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	21
Liberec	x	x	x	x	29	50	28	34	x	x	x	x	12	11	10	17
Ústí nad Labem	x	19	n.a.	x	12	9	35	13	x	12	12	x	6	3	4	3
Zlín	x	x	x	28	25	20	25	29	x	x	x	9	9	7	10	7
Urban centres	Amount of voters/votes								Level of debt per capita (in %)							
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Brno	11660	14487	13214	20676	17167	13123	17877	20493	7,08	7,27	6,85	6,76	6,38	9,74	9,62	n.a.
České Budějovice	x	x	x	1568	2288	1453	1709	1109	6,63	5,87	5,96	5,28	5,07	8,38	8,04	
Hradec Králové	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	2587	8,63	8,08	7,78	8,33	8,9	14,18	13,7	
Liberec	x	x	x	x	3422	3 739	3 723	4960	20,27	19,39	18,24	18,96	20,79	21,83	19,46	
Ústí nad Labem	x	n.a.	n.a.	x	1439	n.a.	5832	n.a.	16,72	16,09	15,92	15,06	14,33	18,67	17,92	
Zlín	x	x	x	4630	5516	3830	6235	6505	5,89	5,6	5,27	4,74	4,38	9,68	9,33	

Source: Authors' own, 2025

Table 4:

Development of selected factors influencing the sustainability of PB in Slovakia

Urban centres	Number of projects submitted											Number of projects supported										
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Banská Bystrica	31	17	12	18	8	16	15	8	7	9	13	4	5	4	6	8	4	4	4	4	4	4
Košice - Sídlisko KVP*	x	x	x	x	x	x	25	23	21	19	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7	7	7	7	x
Košice - Západ	x	x	x	x	x	23	20	19	19	18	11	x	x	x	x	x	10	10	8	8	7	7
Nitra	x	x	x	x	28	68	29	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	12	21	10	x	x	x	x
Trnava	x	x	15	19	21	22	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	14	16	14	13	x	x	x	x	x
Urban centres	Amount of voters/votes											Level of debt per capita (in %)										
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Banská Bystrica	382	470	505	740	253	737	916	865	1110	2500	2100	18,9	25,8	19,1	14,9	12,8	9,7	10,6	10	12,1	20,23	n.a.
Košice - Sídlisko KVP*	x	x	x	x	x	x	13517	8649	9091	n.a.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4,5	3,8	3,8	10,86	
Košice - Západ	x	x	x	x	x	3034	4636	3755	3868	4761	238	x	x	x	x	x	0	3,1	2,9	3	0	
Nitra	x	x	x	x	6000	13608	5830	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	25,2	26,9	24,7	21,6	20,34	
Trnava	x	x	2336	1660	2325	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	18,9	17,4	15,4	16,2	18,3	13,4	22,9	20,54	

Source: Authors' own, 2025

The amount allocated to PB is mainly increasing for Slovak regional cities. However, the amount going to PB relative to the total city budget expenditure is low—for Banská Bystrica, it oscillates around 0.04% of the total budget expenditure; for Košice —Sídlisko KVP, it oscillates around 0.9%, and for Košice West, it oscillates around 2.8%. The smaller cities spend approximately the same amount of the funds allocated to PB on PB as larger cities (Table 2).

The number of submitted projects was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lowest number of projects were submitted during this period. However, the number of approved projects is in units compared to the proposals. Citizen involvement in voting varies widely, with the more funds allocated in PB, the higher the interest from citizens (see Nitra). As of 2021, the highest number of votes was in both districts of Košice. However, it should be noted here that the absolute number of votes cannot be compared, but the number of citizens involved in voting should be analysed (Table 4).

The indebtedness of the regional cities is not high. Only Banská Bystrica showed a jump between 2022 and 2023 (from 12.1% to 20.23%), and for Košice Sídlisko KVP (from 3.8% to 10.86%). An increase was also indicated for Trnava between 2021 and 2022 (from 13.4% to 22.9%), but at that time, Trnava no longer had a PB. For the remaining cities and Košice-West, there was a decrease in indebtedness between 2022 and 2023 (from 3% to 0%). Therefore, the indebtedness of Banská Bystrica and Košice-West, which had a PB in 2024, differs, and no trend or conclusion can be drawn from the data. Also, the data analysis showed no significant deviation in the cities' indebtedness after the PB's end (Table 4).

4.2 Case studies of Brno and Banská Bystrica

The case studies are defined in a series of logical steps that reflect the phases of the participatory budgeting process in general (see e.g. the UN definition - preparation phase, formulation phase, implementation phase and evaluation and monitoring phase).

4.2.1 Participatory budgeting in Brno

Introduction of innovation

Brno introduced participatory budgeting in 2017 (see Table 5). The promoter of the introduction of participatory budgeting in the city was mainly T. Koláčný, who also acted as Deputy Mayor of Brno and a member of the Pirate Party between 2018 and 2022. This political party has long presented itself in Czechia with a positive attitude towards the tools of direct democracy and active public participation. Urban participatory budgeting has been an important topic for the party's candidates and later its representatives in some municipal city functions in their official political agenda.

Table 5:

Basic data on participatory budgeting in Brno (2017-2014)

Year	Amount of resources for project implementation (CZK million)	Share of total city expenditure (%)	Number of voters	Share of voters in total city population (%)	Number of project proposals submitted	Number of projects forwarded to the ballot	Number of projects approved
2017	20	0.15	11 660	3.85	218	83	16
2018	30	0.18	14 487	3.82	133	63	11
2019	35	0.21	13 214	3.47	114	53	14
2020	35	0.20	20 676	5.42	134	64	11
2021	35	0.20	17 167	4.49	124	66	13
2022	35	0.18	13 123	3.46	109	47	7
2023	35	0.18	17 877	4.51	128	56	7
2024	35	0.16	20 493	5.11	105	74	7

Source: damenavas.cz

Management and coordination

The city has set up a dedicated Participatory Budgeting Unit within its own organisational structure. Initially, only one staff member oversaw the tasks falling under this department's agenda, but nowadays, there is a team of staff and experts from practice within its organizational structure. The staff members in this specialised department have been selected so that their expertise covers the different phases of participatory budgeting and all related processes.

Unlike in many other large cities, participatory budgeting occurs at the entire city's level. Approved projects are implemented in cooperation with specific city districts. Therefore, through their representatives, the districts enter into some decision-making processes and even have a veto right when considering projects to be implemented in their territory.

Submission of proposals

Project proposals can be submitted by all residents of the city who are at least 15 years of age. In addition, the rules of participatory budgeting allow each such resident to submit up to five proposals. There are two main ways in which residents can submit project proposals: 1) in paper form through the town hall's office; 2) electronically, on the website of the participatory budgeting initiative 'We put it to you'.

In addition to personal data, proposers must also provide the information specified by the rules about the project proposal, including its estimated value, together with an estimate of the operating costs for implementing the project over a three-year horizon (in the case of an investment project). If submitting a non-investment project (for so-called soft activities where no acquisition, construction or reconstruction of city assets is involved), the operating costs are not to be indicated).

Projects must meet the following criteria:

- Public benefit of the project.
- The project preparation period should not exceed 24 months, and the physical implementation period should not exceed 12 months.
- The city has the competence to implement the project, which must be on the city's territory and property and with the consent of all the districts and municipal corporations affected by the project.
- Maximum cost is CZK 5 million, including VAT, including operating costs for 3 years.
- The project is not directed to housing stock, promotion of commercial or non-commercial character (political or religious), and direct financial means (e.g. subsidies, prizes) must not be provided.

Public meetings

Public meetings have been organised since the very first phase of participatory budgeting. Thanks to them, the city's inhabitants learn about the different parts of the process and its rules.

In the pilot project on participatory budgeting, several types of meetings were defined that could be held: an information meeting on how to develop a project proposal, a meeting of project promoters, public presentations of projects in the different districts, public deliberations with the possibility of voting in person; an evaluation meeting. The Rules of Participatory Budgeting in the City of Brno for 2020 no longer explicitly mention such possibilities for public meetings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, electronic communication replaced face-to-face meetings. After the end of the restrictions related to COVID-19, there was a return to public meetings. There are several types of public meetings. At the beginning of the year, they are mainly related to providing information related to the submission of a proposal, where there is an opportunity to exchange experiences with proponents of successful projects or to find partners for joint submissions. The November meetings are then dedicated to presenting individual projects and the opportunity to vote on projects on the spot.

Gaining legitimacy for proposals

The City Council allows a relatively high number of project proposals to be submitted. For capacity reasons, it does not deal with every one of them. The initial selection of project proposals takes place in the so-called legitimacy phase. Each project proposal has to get either 50 signatures or 300 "likes" - marking it as a "like" on the municipal participatory budgeting website. Only after this legitimacy condition (minimum support from residents) has been met will the Participation Department at the Town Hall start to deal with the project proposal. The disadvantages of this solution are that the identity of those who support the project proposal is not verified via the website and that support may be given to those proposals whose submitters are more socially aware and who can secure a higher number of 'likes' by sharing, even though the project submitted may not be as good as the project in its essence. This weakness, however, is not only related to the proposals but also to the voting itself. In order to gain support, it is necessary to have enough supporters on social networks.

Judging projects

If project proposals receive sufficient votes in the legitimacy phase, the Participation Department will start to deal with them. The first part of the review is carried out by two office staff members who specialise in legal and economic matters. After their assessment and positive evaluation, the project proposals are sent for scrutiny to the representatives of the districts in which the projects are to be implemented. During this assessment, the municipality communicates with the promoters and tries to correct any shortcomings in the submitted project proposals (these corrections are not infrequently related to the fact that the estimated costs of the projects do not reflect the reality). Although, according to the rules, the municipality can reject any proposal, in practice, the office staff tries to support the promoters and treats each proposal as an option to be at least considered.

Deliberation

Proponents of project proposals can participate in a public deliberation - a deliberation - one week before the public vote. The Participation Office organises the public deliberation. It involves a multi-stakeholder discussion, which concludes with a vote on the project proposals. The four projects that receive the most support are then published on the first four positions of the public voting form. The deliberation thus also impacts the conditions for the final vote, as the most supported projects from the public deliberation are easily identifiable by the voting public. However, the ranking determined by the deliberation is insignificant regarding the final ranking. Moreover, deliberation has been significantly reduced since the COVID-19 pandemic and moved entirely online.

Voting

Unlike the submission of projects, only persons of legal age may take part in the voting. In particular, they vote online. However, citizens can also use the public voting stations, located in the town libraries and town hall (assistance is also available from authorised town staff for those who vote in this way).

Possessing a Brno city ID card is a condition for voting. This can be replaced by registering on the city's participatory budgeting website using an ID card number. The City Council uses these conditions because, according to the rules, only citizens of the city can participate in the voting. Thus, the voting system evaluates whether the voting person is registered to vote using the data of a specific citizen of the city.

The voting method chosen is a heavily modified D21 method. Each city citizen has five positive votes (cumulative positive votes are partially allowed, as the voter can give any project proposal one or two such votes) and two negative votes (negative votes cannot be cumulated by the voter to the detriment of one project). The accumulation of positive and negative votes is transparently published continuously throughout the voting period. This has the effect of sharpening the "fight" as the end of the voting approaches. As in some editions, there have been coordinated activities against some proposals to weaken the potential competition; from 2019 onwards, negative votes are only considered if two or more project proposals receive the same number of positive votes.

Implementation of selected proposals

The implementation of the approved projects is managed and coordinated by the city administration. At this stage, the first step is the tendering of the project contractors. The Participation Office carries out all procurements in close cooperation with the relevant departments of the municipality. The condition is that the amount of funds allocated to any municipality must not exceed CZK 10 million, preventing the use of resources earmarked for participatory budgeting from being concentrated in a single municipality. After this stage, the city publishes the relevant information on its own website. It not only reports on the results achieved but also on any delays.

4.2.2 Participatory budgeting in Banská Bystrica

Introduction of innovation

Participatory budgeting was introduced in Banská Bystrica at the end of 2013 (Table 6), which was preceded by the active work of a preparatory committee and consisted of activists from the non-profit sector, namely the cooperation of the local civic association ViaAltera with the civic association Utopia and representatives of the city. The city council approved a budget of € 0.25 per inhabitant for 2014, creating almost € 20,000 for the pilot year.

Table 6:

Basic data on the different years of participatory budgeting in Banská Bystrica

Year	Amount of resources for project implementation (EUR)	Share of total city expenditure (%)	Number of voters	Share of voters in total city population (%)	Number of project proposals submitted	Number of projects forwarded to the ballot	Number of projects approved
2014	€ 19 713	0.04%	382	0.48%	31		4
2015	€ 19 343	0.04%	512	0.65%	17		5
2016	€ 20 000	0.04%	505	0.64%	12		4
2017	€ 30 000	0.05%	740	0.94%	18		6
2018	€ 40 000	0.05%	434	0.55%	8		8
2019	€ 40 000	0.06%	737	0.94%	16		4
2020	€ 40 000	0.06%	916	1.18%	15	9	4
2021	€ 40 000	0.05%	865	1.11%	8		4
2022	€ 40 000	0.04%	1 110	1.43%	7		4
2023-2024	€ 40 000	0.03%	2 500	3.22%	9	9	4
2024-2025	€ 40 000	0.04%	2 100	2.70%	13	11	4

Source: Authors' own, 2025

Management and coordination

In the first year, a 9-member Coordination Council was created and became the standard body of the participatory community. The Participatory Budget Coordination Council is a voluntary advisory, initiative and control body of the PB, whose members are elected by the participants each year at the first discussion forum. The number of members of the Coordination Board shall not be more than twice the number of thematic groups.

The Coordination Council of Banská Bystrica has the following competences:

- approve the basic principles and documents of the functioning of the PB in Banská Bystrica.
- co-organise public events and regular functioning of thematic groups; propose processes and rules of the PB.

- communicates with the executive bodies of the city, mediates communication between the thematic groups.
- monitors the implementation of projects and submits reports and outputs from PB processes to the City Council for approval.
- presents the design of the PB to the executive bodies, namely the mayor.

Submission of proposals

Project submission is open to citizens aged 15 years and older who have permanent or temporary residence in Banská Bystrica. Confirming attendance at a secondary or higher education institution in Banská Bystrica is sufficient for students. The proposer cannot be a member of the coordinating council or town hall employee for PB.

Proposals shall be submitted electronically on the prescribed form (originally, they were submitted in writing at the client point of the town hall). It is recommended that project promoters consult their ideas with the members of the Coordination Board, which organises the thematic group meetings. These were elected each year at a discussion forum, usually on topics whose priorities related to community development, culture, youth work, environment and lifestyle. For the 2023-24 year, for the first time, thematic areas were not identified for the submission of project proposals. For the participatory budget of Banská Bystrica, proposers can submit project proposals for the improvement of any area of public life in the city.

The project proposal must meet the following elements:

- it must be accessible to the public.
- it must be non-commercial in nature.
- it must be maintainable, economical and sustainable in the long term.
- it must be beneficial and of public interest.
- it must be feasible on the territory and land owned by Banská Bystrica.

Assessment of proposals

Banská Bystrica City Council employees assess the fulfilment of all administrative and implementation conditions. Projects that:

a) have not been discussed within the relevant thematic group.
b) conflict with the Statute of the PB in Banská Bystrica, with the conditions announced in the first discussion forum, with the current legislation of the city and the currently valid Programme of Economic and Social Development of the city, are in conflict or are duplicated in the concepts of development of Banská Bystrica.
c) relate to operating or overhead expenses.
d) are contrary to the city's Property Management Principles.
e) are not feasible within the two-year process by 31 December of the relevant year.

Deliberation

Banská Bystrica does not have deliberative voting criteria in place. However, public deliberation is possible in the statute, which only makes a qualitative recommendation on the order of projects (quantitative voting is binding). For the purpose of deliberation, the Coordination Board convenes a second discussion forum (see the Public Meetings section below).

Public meetings

Each year of the participatory budget starts with a first discussion forum convened by the Coordination Board. The Coordination Board, in cooperation with the municipality, ensures the publication of information about the PB procedure and its promotion. At the first discussion forum, the participants decide by voting on priority areas, the formation of thematic groups - may or may not be, set the deadline for submission of proposals, determine the maximum amount of financial support per project and the date of the second discussion forum. Participants also elect the members of the Coordination Board.

At the second discussion forum, the proposers will briefly present their proposals, and a discussion will take place, followed by a public deliberation consisting of a qualitative assessment of the approved project proposals. Public deliberation results in a decision on ranking the projects from the most successful to the least successful. The ranking is established by the participants of the second discussion forum according to pre-formulated and published criteria. The signatures of all participants confirm the ranking of the projects. The public may also participate in the public deliberation. However, the actual evaluation of the projects may only be carried out by the project promoters unless otherwise determined by the Coordination Board. After the public deliberation, the CoR shall call for a vote.

Voting

Until 2023, residents could only vote by physical ballot at designated locations in the Town Hall Information Centre on the main square or in the Town Hall Client Centre. Initially, it was possible to vote for 1 to 4 project proposals. In 2023, the possibility of online voting via the DECIDIM platform was introduced, and it was possible to vote for a maximum of two projects, with only one vote per project.

The vote is open to any natural person who will be 15 years of age in the financial year and who fulfils the following conditions:

f) has permanent residence in the territory of Banská Bystrica.
g) has temporary residence in the territory of Banská Bystrica.
h) provides proof of studying in Banská Bystrica.

Implementation of supported projects

The Coordination Council will hand over successful proposals to the mayor, who will ensure their implementation by the end of the next financial year (signing project implementation contracts with the promoters, thus enabling the funding of the projects). If the second discussion forum does not exhaust all the funds allocated from the city budget for the participatory budget, the Coordination Council is entitled to decide on reallocating these funds in favour of the successful proposals. The city may also consider implementing unsuccessful proposals through other expenditures in the city budget.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research provides a comparative analysis of the development of significant factors influencing the sustainability of participatory budgeting in Czechia and Slovakia. The selected factors influencing the sustainability of PB include the size of the municipality (Wu et al., 2015; Junjan, 2022), the financial health measured by the level of debt per capita (Klimovský et al., 2021; Klun & Benčina, 2021; Murray Svidroňová et al., 2024; Nemec et al., 2022), the amount of money allocated for PB, the number of projects submitted, the number of projects supported (Kukučková & Bakoš, 2023), the number of voters/votes (Kukučková & Poláchová, 2021; Kukučková & Bakoš, 2023; Sedmihradská et al., 2022; Šabović et al., 2021).

Our findings show that regional cities in both countries have a relatively low level of interest in PB, which may be due to a low support from local government officials. Klimovský et al. (2021), Klun and Benčina (2021); Šabović et al. (2021) consider just the personality of the primary decision-maker(s) should be seen as a critical determinant of the successful adoption and further use of PB. Nemec et al. (2023) also confirm this and give the example of Hlohovec, where they show that if there is an interest on the part of the local government in introducing innovations, e.g. in the form of participatory budgeting, the engagement of citizens is also higher. In 2024/2025, approximately 5.5 % of the citizens in Hlohovec participated in the voting on participatory budgeting and the amount of funds allocated was approximately 0.18 % (City of Hlohovec, 2024).

On the one hand, citizens play an important role in a sustainable participatory budget and should be involved as much as possible (Sinervo et al., 2024). However, the results of our investigation point to a relatively low level of citizen involvement in participatory budgeting, either in Czechia or Slovakia, with involvement rates ranging from 0.5% to 3.2% in Banská Bystrica and 3.8% to 6.8% in Brno. For comparison, in Brno, it is only possible for Brno citizens to vote for projects, while in Banská Bystrica, it is also possible for citizens with temporary residence or students with a study certificate to vote for projects.

On the other hand, a sustainable participatory budget requires financial and administrative sustainability, leading to institutionalising participatory budgeting. None of the countries studied has a participatory budget anchored in legislation. Thus, it is up to the individual municipalities to decide whether to introduce participatory budgeting and how to coordinate and finance it. In Brno, we consider it positive that the city is trying to anchor participatory budgeting institutionally, in the sense of creating a special department of participation in the organisational structure of the municipality, which employs a team of staff and experts from practice. Banská Bystrica has created only a voluntary advisory and control body as a Coordination Council composed of 9 elected members. Its members are representatives of the thematic groups, elected annually by participants at the first discussion forum. The number of members must not exceed twice the number of thematic groups. The details of the election process may be defined in the election rules, which are prepared by the Council and approved during the first discussion forum. The Coordination Council elects a spokesperson from among its members to represent the Council externally. A designated City employee will be appointed as the point of contact for communication with the Coordination Council as of the date of the first discussion forum. A thematic group is a group of participants who have chosen a specific topic within the framework of the participatory budget in which its members wish to engage in public activities. In cases of uncertainty regarding the classification, establishment, or dissolution of a thematic group, the Coordination Council of the Participatory Budget shall issue guidance. Each thematic group has a representative (delegate) who is a member of the Coordination Council of the Participatory Budget. Thematic groups serve as a space for people united by a common area of interest to meet, support one another, or find inspiration in developing solutions for the City in the form of project proposals.

The financial sustainability of a participatory budget can be seen as the capacity of an entity to preserve its existence by effectively balancing its accounts, securing adequate financial resources to fulfil its responsibilities, and not accruing an amount of debt that cannot be repaid by future generations without compromising their financial possibilities (Sinervo et al., 2024; Wals & Schwarzin, 2011). Rationalising decisions regarding the quantity and quality of expenditure and the ability to gain legitimacy and consensus within and outside the organisation are important factors for financial sustainability (Bergmann & Grossi, 2014). Thus, it can be concluded that the relatively low level of participatory budgeting in the selected cities (in Brno, about 0.18% of total expenditure and Banská Bystrica, about 0.04% of total expenditure) is precisely the reason for ensuring the financial sustainability of participatory budgeting. For comparison, e.g. in Scotland, national and local governments have agreed to allocate a minimum of 1% of the budget to participatory budgeting. In Sicily, the regional government even requires by law that local authorities allocate 2% of their funding to participatory democracy tools. In other countries, however, like the regions we studied, local governments decide on the amount of spending on participatory budgeting, with the rule that the larger the city, the more resources are allocated to participatory budgeting, e.g. Vermenton, Poitiers, Grenoble, Rennes and Paris in France (Snippe & Ellena, 2023). The very non-debt or the state of the financial health of the local government is also crucial. In CEE countries, participatory budgeting is usually introduced when municipalities are sufficiently financially "sound" (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2024), whereas in Germany, for example, the behaviour of municipalities is different. Apostolou and Eckardt (2022), based on exploratory cluster analysis and confirmatory mean analysis, show that the introduction of participatory budgeting is more likely in municipalities with financial problems.

On the other hand, however, the low level of allocated spending on participatory budgeting may result from lower levels of citizen engagement, either in submitting projects or in terms of willingness to vote. In both cities studied, there has been a decrease in the number of projects submitted over the years (Brno from 218 to 105, Banská Bystrica from 31 to 13). The positive impact on increasing citizen engagement can also be attributed to the introduction of ICT in participatory budgeting, e.g. by promoting electronic project submission or online voting (Nemec et al., 2023). In Brno, participatory budgeting projects can be submitted electronically, and voting is also done electronically, which has decreased the role of deliberation, however it is still possible to vote in person at public meetings. In contrast, in Banská Bystrica, although projects can be submitted electronically, voting is done exclusively in physical form, which may negatively impact individuals' willingness to go out and vote for a project.

The results of our investigation suggest conflicting goals for ensuring sustainability, similar to the results of Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014); Ganuza and Baiocchi (2012), and Sinervo et al. (2024), where for better sustainability of participatory budgeting it is preferable in terms of time to set a lower level of allocated financial expenditures, but on the other hand, a given level may have a disincentive effect on citizens and their willingness to participate in public affairs (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2024). The aforementioned will consequently translate into fewer citizens involved in voting and thus choosing projects that may not reflect the majority's views, but only those who can sell their project on 'social networks'. From this perspective, low levels of earmarked financial expenditure may lead to lower motivation to engage in participatory budgeting (Soukop et al., 2021). However, the low level of citizen engagement can also be attributed to the lack of information or how information is disseminated in local governments (Soukop et al., 2021), although there are several different ways of disseminating information about participatory budgets in Brno. It can be assumed that those interested in this issue can access the information.

Based on the analysis, participatory budgeting is relatively well-established in Czechia and Slovakia. The above is also evidenced by the Brno and Banská Bystrica cases, where participatory budgeting already has a history. However, in terms of development, the amount allocated and the number of projects submitted are relatively low. This area could be the subject of further research - to quantitatively analyse the impact of the amount allocated on the number of projects submitted or the number of citizens (voters) involved. Further research would also expand the sample from regional cities to all municipalities in Czechia and Slovakia involved in participatory budgeting. This would eliminate one of the limitations of the presented research, which focuses on a selected sample of regional cities with implemented PB. We can also include among the limitations that the research compares only two countries in the CEE area, and the results cannot be generalised. However, the paper maps development of important factors influencing participatory budgeting sustainability in the cities. The case studies highlight the diversity of participatory budgeting, which only confirms that although the main idea of involving citizens in decision-making is preserved, the actual implementation takes different forms.

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