



# The Problem of the Size of Municipalities in Slovenia: Views of Residents and Mayors

## Problem wielkości gmin w Słowenii: poglądy mieszkańców i burmistrzów

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### Abstract

The paper analyses the territorial aspects of Slovenian municipalities and the problem of their optimal size. The central question of it, namely, what the ideal or optimal size of municipalities should be in terms of population and surface area, so that they can effectively perform their tasks and at the same time ensure adequate participation of citizens, is a difficult one in political science and has no clear answer. As many other European countries, Slovenia has been facing difficulties since the dawn of its independence (1991) in finding the ideal or optimal size of municipalities and the corresponding scope of their competences. Political arguments often prevail over expert ones, which confirms the

### Abstrakt

W artykule przeanalizowano aspekty terytorialne słoweńskich gmin oraz problem ich optymalnej wielkości. Centralne pytanie, a mianowicie, jaka powinna być idealna lub optymalna wielkość gmin pod względem liczby ludności i powierzchni, aby mogły one skutecznie wykonywać swoje zadania, a jednocześnie zapewnić odpowiednią reprezentację obywateli, jest trudnym zagadnieniem w naukach politycznych i nie ma na nie jednoznacznej odpowiedzi. Podobnie jak wiele innych krajów europejskich, Słowenia od początku swojej niepodległości (1991 r.) boryka się z trudnościami w znalezieniu idealnej lub optymalnej wielkości gmin i związanego z tym zakresu ich kompetencji. Argumenty polityczne często

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seriousness of a social problem that goes beyond local self-government and affects the whole country. The search for the ideal size of municipalities – whether by partitioning or merging them – has been a hotly debated issue, dividing both politicians and the professional community, yet according to the results of the analysis carried out, Slovenia may not be as far from the ideal size of municipalities as these debates sometimes make it seem.

**Keywords:** local self-government, municipality, mayors, citizens, size, Slovenia

przeważają nad eksperymentami, co potwierdza powagę problemu społecznego, który wykracza poza samorząd lokalny i dotyka całego kraju. Poszukiwanie idealnej wielkości gmin – czy to poprzez ich podział, czy łączenie – było przedmiotem gorącej debaty, dzielącej zarówno polityków, jak i społeczność zawodową, jednakże zgodnie z wynikami przeprowadzonej analizy, wielkość gmin w Słowenii może nie odbiegać tak znacznie od wartości optymalnej jak to sugerują uczestnicy debat.

**Słowa kluczowe:** samorząd lokalny, gmina, burmistrzowie, obywatele, wielkość, Słowenia

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we analyse the concept of the appropriate size of municipalities using the example of Slovenian local self-government. There are at least two criteria for defining the size of a municipality, namely, the territory size and the population size (Swianiewicz, 2002c, p. 5). The size of a municipality amounts to a question of what the territory and the population should be and what the powers of the municipality should be to meet the needs of its inhabitants and at the same time to allow them to participate directly in the decision-making process. If a municipality is too large, it loses its internal cohesion, which makes it seem distant to its inhabitants, who, consequently, feel unable to influence decisions or to take decisions directly. If the municipality is too small, however, the inhabitants perform only minor functions in its institutions because they have no other place to exercise their self-governing rights (Grafenauer, 2000, p. 52). Therefore, between large and small municipalities there usually occurs a collision of the political demands for local democracy, or the highest possible degree of inclusiveness of the population in the decision-making processes for the fulfilment of everyday interests and needs on the one hand, on the other hand, the demands of administrative and organisational rationality, according to which the administration should function in a modern way, that is as efficiently as possible in relation to its tasks and expectations.

The above stems from the fact that the normative framework defining a municipality often includes a criterion of the number of inhabitants that a given self-governing local community must have. Interestingly, the Slovenian legal frame-

work contains a gap between the legal requirement (that a municipality should have at least 5,000 inhabitants) (Law on Local Government 2018, Article 13.a) and the actual situation, which shows that as many as half of the municipalities do not meet this criterion. Other European countries face similar challenges, which is why Slovenian national legislators, in the context of reforms to ensure that newly created municipalities are not socially problematic and dependent on state budget support, have included among their recommendations that a minimum number of inhabitants should be defined for a municipality. Later, experts from the Council of Europe found that the limit of 3,000 inhabitants was set too low in the light of modern social currents and suggested that larger municipalities should be formed (Vrišer, 1994, p. 34). It is also interesting to look at the history of the formation of Slovene municipalities, where, at several points in time, the minimum number of inhabitants needed to form a municipality is decreed, when the minimum number of inhabitants required (by law) ranged from a few hundred (in the cadastral municipalities in the Habsburg Monarchy) through 2,500 in the time of the French communes in the Illyrian provinces, to 3,000 during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia right before the Second World War. In the present-day Republic of Slovenia, the minimum population was initially set at 5,000 inhabitants (Čokert, 2005), to which exceptions were initially allowed for economic, cultural, or historical reasons (with the lower limit of 2,000 inhabitants), but after 2011, the minimum of 5,000 inhabitants was fixed more firmly and exceptions were no longer allowed.

Theoretical expectations concerning the territorial aspects of municipal functioning are often contradictory and are frequently linked to questions of the functional aspect of the size of municipalities. The liberal view argues that the capacity for economic development increases with the size of municipalities, and that the ability to mobilise resources is decisive; conversely, however, supporters of localism claim that the problems of (too) large bureaucracies are more conspicuous in larger municipalities and that smaller municipalities may, in fact, prove to be more effective in competing for investment (Brezovšek, 2009, p. 1). Liberal theory also points to the greater ability of large municipalities to deliver public services, while localism theory argues that the size of municipalities is irrelevant because public services can be contracted out to private providers (Brezovšek, 2005, pp. 76–77).

## 2. Theoretical basis

### 2.1. Municipalities in Slovenia and in Europe

Municipalities are the level of government that is usually closest to the citizens; they respond to the most diverse populations and the most intense social, economic and political problems in any country, and are responsible for providing a wide range of public services. Local self-government in Slovenia has practically been operational since January 1995, when territorially modified municipalities with new content and new bodies started to operate. In the years since the reintroduction of local self-government, many changes have taken place, particularly in the legislative sphere. The reform of local self-government is far from complete, as shown by numerous comparisons with foreign systems, and by the comparison of our system and practice with European standards of local and regional democracy, as contained in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the aspirations, guidelines and recommendations of the Council of Europe and the European Union (Brezovšek & Kukovič, 2012, pp. 124–127).

According to modern concepts, a municipality should, first and foremost, adequately meet the needs of its inhabitants and fulfil other statutory tasks, and therefore be formed in an area within which it can adequately carry out its tasks. The area in which a municipality is to be established must meet the conditions laid down in the Local Self-Government Act (1993, 2012). Following the amendment of the Act in 2011, the only requirement is that it must have a minimum population of 5,000. Prior to the amendment, in addition to the requirement of at least 5,000 inhabitants (exceptionally, for geographical, border, ethnic, historical, or economic reasons, a municipality with less than 5,000 inhabitants could be established, but not with less than 2,000 inhabitants), a municipality with less than 5,000 inhabitants could also be established, however, the newly established municipality was also required to provide full primary education, access to primary medical and social care, provision of necessities for life, public utilities, postal services, a library, premises for the administrative activities of the municipality, etc. (Law on Local Government, 2012, articles 13. and 13.a). Despite these provisions, more than half of the municipalities in Slovenia (112) have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and 26 municipalities have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants and were therefore established completely outside the legislation in force at the time (Haček, 2012, p. 71).

Comparing the municipalities across Europe in terms of their sizes of territory and population, we find that European municipalities largely differ from one another. Since the origins of local self-government, there have been at least two general concepts of local self-government at the lowest level of government

in Europe. The first is the concept of relatively large municipalities, as used in the UK and the Nordic countries. On the other hand, there is so-called continental concept of small municipalities, of which Germany and France are typical representatives, the latter being divided into almost 37,000 small municipalities. The differences between countries can be explained by historical reasons (tradition) and the inertia of the territorial organisation itself (Brezovšek, 2009, p. 209). The idea that the efficiency of local self-government would be increased by creating larger local authorities has led to a series of reforms of local authority (municipal) boundaries, which have led to a dramatic reduction in the number of municipalities in several European countries (the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark). An example is Denmark, where (in 2007) 238 municipalities – out of the original 271 – were merged by the state into 65 municipalities (Lassen & Seritzlew, 2011, p. 242; Brezovšek & Kukovič, 2015). The Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain have less than half of the municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants; and Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Finland have most municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (Brezovšek & Kukovič, 2015). The UK, Lithuania and Denmark (after the reform) have the largest municipalities by population, while the Czech Republic, Slovakia and France have the smallest. As a result, a municipality in the UK is, at average, 90-times larger in terms of population size than an average municipality in the Czech Republic. In terms of territory size, the largest municipalities are in Sweden and Lithuania, while the smallest are in Malta, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Comparing Slovenian municipalities with those of other European countries, we can see that Slovenia ranks just below the top half of all countries in terms of average size and average number of inhabitants in municipalities. Compared to the average municipality in EU countries, the Slovenian average municipality is twice as large and almost twice as populous (Haček, 2012, pp. 69–76; Brezovšek & Kukovič, 2015).

## 2.2. The issue of municipal size

A review of the literature raises the question of the size of municipalities and thus the debate on what their ideal or optimal size should be and in which direction structural and territorial reforms of local governments should go (Kuhlmann & Bouckaert, 2016; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014; Denters et al., 2014). The size of the local community is a problematic concept in the literature on local government. Dahl and Tufte (1973) in their *Size in Democracy* argue that size is largely a two-dimensional concept. On the one hand, it is about the efficiency of the citizens and, on the other, the capacity of the system. The former dimension refers to the extent to which citizens can control the decisions of the state, while the latter to the capacity of a polity to respond adequately to the

expectations and demands of its citizens. Both dimensions are often used to either advocate for or oppose territorial reforms (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010), as authors have argued that local authorities in smaller municipalities are more responsive to the demands of their citizens, while larger municipalities are better equipped with a larger administrative apparatus and therefore more capable of delivering better services. The emphasis on the responsiveness of local authorities was evident in the rhetoric advocating the case for maintaining very small municipalities (Denters et al., 2014; Kristinsson, 2014). Authors who are more in favour of a fragmented system of smaller local governments have mostly turned to public choice theory (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Feiock, 2007) in search of a convincing argument, which would support the idea that small municipalities are just as capable as large ones of providing adequate living standards for their citizens.

The size of a municipality can be defined by at least two potential criteria, namely, the size of its territory (expressed in km<sup>2</sup>) and the number of inhabitants within this territory, or a combination of both (Swianiewicz, 2002b, p. 5). Thus, municipalities that meet one or the other criterion, or both at the same time, can be classified into different categories. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but the criterion referring to the number of inhabitants in a municipality is more often used (King, 1984, p. 17; Grafenauer, 2000, p. 52). This directly relates to consumers of local government services. Nevertheless, for certain problems, the criterion referring to the size of territory is equally important (e.g., for a functional school network, it is not only the number of pupils that matters, but also the distance to the nearest school, the maintenance of small schools in rural areas, the number of teachers, etc.). In this respect, two concepts are used in the literature, namely large and small municipalities.

Discussions on what constitutes a small and a large municipality, or the “ideal” size of a municipality in relation to the number of inhabitants, can be found as early as in the times of classical philosophers; Plato proposed 5,040 inhabitants, whereas Aristotle (1948, p. 292), in turn, stated that a population must be large enough to become self-sufficient in order for its inhabitants to attain a good way of life. Later, this figure was considerably increased, as Robert Dahl argued at the 1967 annual meeting of political scientists that the ideal municipal population size was between 50,000 and 200,000 inhabitants (Dahl, 1967, p. 965). Moreover, he gave a clear answer to the question of the ideal size: smaller communities provide better opportunities for residents to participate, and larger communities give them the opportunity to influence a wider range of potentially more important political decisions (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 3). The problem of the size of municipalities consists of two aspects, namely the preservation of local (territorial) cohesion (this factor limits or narrows the possibility of expanding the territorial size of municipalities) and the provision of the possibility of economic operation (a certain size of municipalities is a necessary

assumption, since small municipalities do not have the means and resources necessary to manage complex public services). Size corresponds to the point at which a municipality, as economically viable, starts to provide public services; the crux of the matter is that the size of a municipality depends on its competences (Vlaj, 2004, p. 261; Kukovič, Haček, & Bukovnik, 2016, p. 305; Brezovšek & Kukovič, 2012, p. 47).

There are many arguments both for and against large (or small) municipalities. Referring to the results of an extensive empirical study, Humes and Harloff (1969) conclude that local communities need to be large enough to have adequate staff and other conditions, and small enough to maintain a community atmosphere in which individuals feel that they can successfully influence the policies of that community. It can therefore be stated that the strengths of one group of municipalities represent the weaknesses of another group of municipalities. In Western Europe, after the Second World War and during the first two decades of the current century, there has been a resurgence of the trend towards merging local communities. According to the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Public Administration*, a merger with or incorporation of local communities is the process by which one or more local communities come together to form a new organisation (Belley, 2012, p. 1). There are two variations of the creation of larger local communities; it can be the merging of several smaller local communities into a larger local community, or it can be the incorporation of smaller local communities into a larger local community. In both cases, a larger local community is created. There are two ways of merging local communities: voluntary mergers or compulsory, top-down mergers. Voluntary mergers occur after a joint decision of the population in two or more local communities, while in the case of compulsory mergers, the arguments for merging local communities are cited by higher levels of government as being mainly based on greater economic efficiency, ease of governance and results in greater extend of democratic participation by citizens. The argument of greater economic efficiency argues that larger local communities can provide better public services than smaller ones, particularly, they are able to provide public services at lower costs due to economies of scale (Boyne, 1992; Boyne, 1996; Dollery, Mun Ho, & Alin, 2008). Certainly, the effects of economies of scale in merging local communities will be seen in infrastructure-intensive industries (wastewater disposal) in the local community, as fixed costs will be spread over a larger population, while on the other hand, in labour-intensive industries, the effects of economies of scale will not be seen, as additional individuals will need to be employed in the local community to accommodate the increased volume of work. The costs of efficient management also increase at a certain population threshold. Population is not the best measure of production costs and economies of scale, as there are other factors at play, such as weather, topography, age of the population, seasonal effects (tourist season) (Tavares, 2018, pp. 5–6). Advocates of merging

local communities and larger local communities cite the argument of greater development potential, as local communities, due to their size, should be able to benefit from lower interest rates when borrowing, while at the same time experiencing less risk when investing (Tavares, 2018, pp. 5–6). Greater management efficiency among the proponents of merging local authorities is possible and certain in terms of better public service delivery, as local authorities have more efficient and more specialised management through human resources after the merger. A larger local community can effectively improve the areas of spatial planning, public transport, fire services, etc. (Newton, 1982). A high level of functional differentiation can only be achieved in large local communities, and this may be one of the main motives for merging municipalities. The realisation that only sufficiently large local authorities can provide sufficient quality staff in the form of experts in specific areas of local authority work, sufficient quality clerical staff to work in the local authority and to work with local authority residents, is leading in the direction of a reform of local authority consolidation combined with high functional differentiation across Northern Europe (Denters et al., 2014).

### 2.3. The ideal municipality size

Two approaches have emerged in the debate on the ideal size of local government units: communitarianism, which emphasises the representative role of local government, and liberalism, which emphasises the efficiency of public service delivery. The former approach leads to freedom of fragmentation, while the latter calls for the creation of larger local government units (Swianiewicz, 2000, p. 28; Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Feiock, 2007). Two main theories have developed from these approaches: the first is the reformist theory, or economy of scale, which lists reasons in favour of mergers, that is, the creation of larger municipalities, while the second draws on ideas from localism and public choice theory and is oriented towards territorial fragmentation, that is, smaller municipalities (Swianiewicz, 2002b, pp. 8–11; Baldersheim, & Rose, 2010; Feiock, 2007). The authors state that the supportive arguments for the former theory have basis in economies of scale for many local services, at the same time emphasising the advantages of large municipalities, such as: (a) marginal costs are lower in the case of larger units; smaller units, on the other hand, generate spill-over costs; (b) larger units can perform more tasks, which may contribute to greater public interest and thus participation in local politics; (c) territorial integration provides more space for various interest groups to operate and thus creates a plural society, which makes nepotism and political favouritism more difficult; (d) larger units have a greater chance of creating a strong civil society; (e) larger units promote local economic development.



In contrast, supporters of municipal fragmentation argue that: a) in smaller units, the relationship between local councillors and citizens is closer and politicians are more accountable to their communities (trust is based on personal contacts); b) in small units, people can choose their accommodation according to the ratio of taxes to public services provided; c) small municipalities are more cohesive and it is therefore easier to implement plans favoured by the majority of the population; and d) a sense of community (identification) is greater in small municipalities, and therefore participation in public affairs is greater; e) the amount of red tape in small municipalities is less daunting, which encourages competition between local authorities to attract capital; and last but not least, f) small municipalities are better able to stimulate experimentation and innovation and to learn from their neighbours (Swianiewicz, 2002b, pp. 8–11; Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Feiock, 2007). One of the key advantages of a small local community is therefore precisely to maintain a local community harmony and spirit in which every citizen feels that he or she has the possibility to be politically effective (Humes & Harloff, 1969, p. 67). Simultaneously, larger local communities have larger populations, which translates into greater number of employees whose work contributes to generating higher incomes, which, in turn, constitute the economic foundation for better functioning of local services, thus enabling the needs and interests of citizens to be met (Haček, 2012, pp. 67–68).

Keating (1995) suggested that there are some key points to consider when determining the optimal size of local government. First factor to be assessed is the relationship between the size of local government and the economic efficiency of service delivery, namely, whether economies of scale and the size of local government are important factors in the cost of public service delivery. Second factor to investigate is the relationship between the size of local government and the efficiency of its officials, or whether there are trade-offs between the size of local government and the economic efficiency of local officials. It is also important to establish whether the size of local authorities has an impact not only on the equity of service provision, but also on the distribution of the tax burden associated with the provision of public services. The relationship between the size of local communities and economic growth in the environment is also important (Dollery & Robotti, 2008, p. 30).

The topic of the ideal size of municipalities has proven to be a polarising one (Sancton, James, & Ramsey, 2000): on the one hand, there are proponents of the “bigger is better in local government” view, who favour the merging of smaller local authorities into larger local government authorities, while on the other hand, there are proponents who argue that “small is fine” and therefore oppose the increase of the average size of local government authorities through transformation initiatives based on structural reforms. Dollery, Crase and Johnson (2006) examined the arguments concerning economic efficiency and the size of local government that are commonly raised in the debate on the ideal

size of local authorities. The authors identify the main grounds for contestation, which are economies of scale, administrative and technical capacity, administration and its costs, ecological factors, and public choice. Swianiewicz (2002a) attempted to capture the main arguments put forward by both sides concerning the economic and democratic efficiency of local self-government and identifies seven pillars of territorial consolidation: (a) small local governments, unlike larger local governments, cannot capture the externalities associated with their activities; (b) larger local governments can provide more services, which can lead to greater public interest and participation in local politics; (c) consolidation gives more space to interest groups representing pluralistic societies; d) large local governments offer more opportunities for the emergence of a strong civil society; e) larger municipal governments can better stimulate economic growth and development; f) the arguments of those who advocate territorial fragmentation are often idealistic and vague, as most citizens are more interested in the quality and cost of service provision than in participation in decision-making on the local level.

In defining the ideal size of municipalities, authors have mainly focused on a single argument for or against large or small municipalities, such as the impact of size on political participation (Navarro & Clark, 2010) or the impact of size on service delivery and the quality of democracy (CDLR, 2001), but there is a lack of a more comprehensive (empirical) approach in the literature. Keating (1995, p. 31) argues that the optimal size of a municipality is subject to four criteria, namely: a) economic efficiency (more services for less cost); b) democracy (participation; citizens' influence on local structures); c) distribution (to ensure the best possible citizens' control over public services and resources); and e) development (how to foster economic growth).

### 3. Empirical study

The purpose of the empirical research is to, on the one hand, examine the views of mayors of local authorities and, on the other, their residents regarding the size of municipalities. To achieve this objective, two empirical studies have been carried out. The first is a survey on satisfaction of citizens with their municipality and the second is a survey among mayors on the impact of municipality size on municipality performance.

### 3.1. The survey on citizens' satisfaction with their municipality in relation to the size of the municipality

The studied population was the adult population of Slovenia. The survey was carried out in January 2022 by Episcenter, a specialised public opinion research company, on a representative sample of 503 adult residents of Slovenia. The survey covered 12.5% of respondents from small municipalities up to 50 km<sup>2</sup> in size, 27% of respondents from medium-sized municipalities between 50 km<sup>2</sup> and 100 km<sup>2</sup>, and 60.4% of respondents from municipalities above 100 km<sup>2</sup> of area. By the population criterion, 31% of respondents were from small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), 30.2% of respondents were from municipalities with 10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants, and 38.8% of respondents were from large municipalities with 25,001 inhabitants or more.

One of the main objectives of the empirical research was to investigate whether the size of a municipality influences citizens' satisfaction with their municipality. The questionnaire asked how satisfied citizens had been with their municipality in general, and then about their opinion on the appropriateness of the size of their municipality.

The results show that size, measured by the area of the municipality, is not a significant factor in satisfaction with the municipality, as the overall satisfaction of citizens with their municipality does not differ significantly relative to its size. On a scale from one (not at all satisfied) to five (very satisfied), average satisfaction is only slightly lower in municipalities with up to 50 km<sup>2</sup> ( $M = 3.27$ ) than in medium-size ( $M = 3.43$ ) and large ( $M = 3.46$ ) municipalities. Overall satisfaction with the municipality is slightly higher in larger municipalities with 25,001 or more inhabitants ( $M = 3.55$ ), while in municipalities between 10,001 and 25,000 inhabitants the average satisfaction score is 3.32, and in the smallest municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants it is 3.38.

Citizens also gave their views on whether their municipality was too small, just right or too big in terms of its population and area. Their answers were compared with the actual size of the municipality to see how perceptions matched reality. In the smallest municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), we found that 31.1% of citizens think their municipality is too small, 65.5% think it is just right, and 3.4% think it is too big. In municipalities between 10,001 and 25,000 inhabitants, we found that 12.2% of citizens consider their municipality too small, 82.1% consider it just right and 5.7% consider it too big. In the largest municipalities (more than 25,000 inhabitants), we found that 3.9% of citizens think their municipality is too small, 80.9% think it is just right and 15.2% think their municipality is too big. The data clearly show that the proportion of citizens who consider their municipality too small decreases as the population of the municipality increases. At the same time, the proportion of citizens who consider their municipality too big increases with the number of inhabitants. It is worth

noting that an overwhelming majority of citizens representing all three municipality sizes consider the size of their municipality to be just right, with this opinion being most pronounced in municipalities between 10,001 and 25,000 inhabitants (82.1%). The satisfaction of citizens with the size of their municipality is therefore highest in medium-sized municipalities.

We also asked respondents why they were dissatisfied with a municipality that was (too) small or (too) big. The most common reasons given by respondents from small municipalities were that there is “no competition,” that there are no basic services such as banks, post offices, health stations (healthcare centres), and shops, that there is not enough social and cultural life and other amenities to contribute to a better quality of life. On the other hand, respondents from large municipalities most often point to overcrowding, which causes congestion, impersonal attitudes, a lack of interest in the needs of others, point out that citizens’ initiatives are lost and that in smaller municipalities people are more connected with each other. Among other problems, the respondents mention the development of the centre of the municipality, while the periphery is neglected; they also point to the excessive use of concrete and the unsustainable development of green areas, which is carried out without considering the opinion of the citizens.

Citizen satisfaction is therefore higher in municipalities that are slightly larger in terms of area and population. This is because these municipalities are better able to maintain the entire public infrastructure, such as waterworks (systems), sewerage, and roads. In more populated municipalities, services are more accessible and more readily available to citizens. There are also more opportunities for education and employment.

### 3.2. The survey on mayors’ views on the size of municipalities

In this part of the empirical research, the studied group were mayors of all 212 Slovenian municipalities. The online survey was sent in February 2022 to the email addresses of mayors, secretariats or offices of mayors. The survey was fully completed by 89 mayors, representing 42% of the total group, which suggests that this survey is also representative. The aim of the questionnaire was to explore mayors’ views on the size of their municipalities, and then to compare the responses with each other according to the size of the municipality in terms of area and population.

As many as 38.2% of mayors from small municipalities (up to 50 km<sup>2</sup>), 31.5% of mayors from medium-sized municipalities (50–100 km<sup>2</sup>), and 30.3% of mayors from large municipalities (of more than 100 km<sup>2</sup>) answered the questions fully. According to the population criterion, 70.8% of the mayors who answered all questions come from small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), 23.6%

from medium-sized municipalities (10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants) and 5.6% from municipalities with 25,001 or more inhabitants.

Table 1

Mayors' opinion on the appropriateness of the size of their municipality in terms of the population criterion (in %)

Opinion	Municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants	Municipalities with 10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants	Municipalities with more than 25,000 inhabitants
The municipality is too big	3.2	4.8	–
The municipality is just right	82.3	76.2	80.0
The municipality is too small	14.5	19.0	20.0

Source: The authors' own email survey of Slovenian municipal mayors ( $n = 89$ ).

When asked how they assess the adequacy of the size of their municipality according to the population criterion, around four-fifths of the mayors, regardless of how large their municipality was, consider it to be adequately sized. The proportion of those who think so is highest among mayors of municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants (82.3%), which contrasts with the opinion of the citizens of these municipalities (see above).

We also asked the mayors in more detail about the reasons for their opinion concerning the adequacy of municipality size. Based on content analysis we categorised their answers into the groups.

In their responses, mayors of small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants) highlighted several challenges they face. Financial constraints are the most frequently mentioned (28% of responses), reflecting the difficulty of securing sufficient funds for investment, infrastructure maintenance, and the provision of necessary services. Infrastructure challenges (22%) refer to the construction and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, utilities, and medical facilities. Development constraints (16% of responses) include difficulties in implementing major projects and lack of resources to promote economic and social development.

The responses of mayors of medium-sized municipalities (10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants) are also quite like those of mayors of small municipalities. These mayors also highlight infrastructure challenges the most (28.6%), pointing out that roads, public lighting, sewers, and forest roads are more expensive to maintain due to the dispersed population, and that the extensive territory and dispersed population also make it more expensive to build and maintain infrastructure and provide services such as rubbish collection and snow ploughing. In addition, mayors of medium-sized municipalities also highlight economic challenges (14.3%), noting lower budget revenue due to lower over-

all purchasing power, which can lead to less attractiveness for new investments. They also point to the difficulty of securing their own financing for major projects.

Mayors of large municipalities, in turn, mainly highlighted financial constraints (80% of responses); although their municipalities are considered developed, they consider them to be disadvantaged when it comes to accessing EU funds. For example, they state that they have the same need for schools, nurseries and sports infrastructure as less developed municipalities, but do not have sufficient financial resources to finance these projects. Some mayors also point to challenges related to the size and dispersion of the municipality. They state that the large surface area of a municipality results in a major responsibility for the development of all places, not just the centre. A case in point here is the municipality of Kamnik, which is the same size as Ljubljana in terms of area, but has a ten times smaller budget, which means that it must take care of the same area with ten times less resources.

We also asked the mayors whether their municipality would work better if it were smaller in terms of population. More than three-quarters (78.9%) of mayors answered in the negative, with the highest proportion of mayors coming from small municipalities (82.4%) and the lowest proportion coming from large municipalities (66.7%). We then reversed the question and asked whether their municipality would work better if it were larger in terms of population. In response, 58.7% of mayors from municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants and municipalities with 10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants, and 50% of mayors from large municipalities with more than 25,000 inhabitants answered positively. The mayors highlighted several advantages of increasing the size of their municipality, with investment and funding at the top of the list, as larger municipalities would allow for greater investment in essential projects, facilitate the acquisition of EU funds and attract more human resources to implement them. At the same time, a larger population would also mean more revenue and allow for more investment and, consequently, better infrastructure development. Some mayors also pointed out the disadvantages that a larger municipality would bring. One of them is that the municipality could become less operational and efficient. An increase in the size of the municipality could bring more complexity in management, which could affect the speed and efficiency of decision-making and project implementation. Another concern relates to communication. In a larger municipality, the circulation of information might be slower, which could affect the level of response to citizens' problems and needs. This could impair the speed and effectiveness of addressing the problems faced by citizens.

Table 2

Mayors' opinion on the suitability of the size of their municipality according to the area criterion (in %)

Opinion	Municipalities with the area up to 50 km <sup>2</sup>	Municipalities with the area between 50 km <sup>2</sup> and 100 km <sup>2</sup>	Municipalities with the area of over 100 km <sup>2</sup>
The municipality is too big	—	17.9	37.0
The municipality is just right	85.3	75.0	63.0
The municipality is too small	14.7	7.1	—

Source: The authors' own email survey conducted among Slovenian municipal mayors ( $n = 89$ ).

Three-quarters of the mayors surveyed (75.3%) consider their municipality to be just the right size, 16.9% would like a smaller municipality, and 7.9% a larger municipality. The share of mayors who would like a larger municipality is 14.7% in the group of mayors from the smallest municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), 7.1% in the medium-sized municipalities (10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants), and no such mayor was found among the respondents in the large municipalities.

We also asked mayors whether their municipality would function better if it were smaller in area. Almost two-thirds of the mayors surveyed (63.8%) think that their municipality's functioning would not improve if it were smaller in area. In small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), 80.8% of mayors responded this way, in medium-sized municipalities (10,001 to 25,000 inhabitants) – 63.6%, and in large municipalities (over 25,000 inhabitants) only 42.9%. Then we modified the question and asked whether a given municipality would work more efficiently if it were larger in area. More than three-quarters of the mayors surveyed (77.3%) think that nothing would change if their municipality were larger in area than it is now.

## 4. Conclusions

The surveys of mayors and residents of municipalities revealed different views on the benefits and challenges of municipal size in terms of area and population.

In large municipalities (over 25,000 inhabitants), mayors and citizens perceive different advantages and challenges related to the size and diversity of the municipality. Mayors of large municipalities highlighted several advantages of larger area and population, including the diversity of the natural environment

and the opportunities it offers for tourism development. Many pointed out that a larger area allows for the expansion of settlements and the development of the economy, which includes more green space and room for more investment. It was also pointed out that a larger municipality allows for a more autonomous spatial policy and more opportunities to meet the different needs of citizens. Some mayors pointed to the opportunities offered by unspoilt nature and the variety of leisure activities. However, mayors of large municipalities also highlighted some challenges, including the increased complexity of managing the municipal apparatus, the higher costs of maintaining infrastructure, and the sometimes-difficult accessibility of infrastructure for all citizens. While citizens of large municipalities identified some advantages, such as more job opportunities, more public services and greater diversity of population, they also stressed some of the challenges. These include feeling alienated from municipal structures, feeling that their needs are not considered and frustration with the high cost of living.

In medium-sized municipalities (10,001–25,000 inhabitants), mayors and citizens have different perceptions of the benefits and challenges of municipal size. The mayors of medium-sized municipalities noted certain advantages of this size, pointing out that a larger municipal area allows to utilise its historical features more comprehensively and provides ample space for the expansion of settlements and the development of the economy. They also consider that such municipalities offer opportunities for tourism and recreation. Despite the advantages, the mayors of medium-sized municipalities also acknowledged some challenges. They pointed out that a larger surface area can lead to higher costs for investment and maintenance of infrastructure, as well as problems in discharging municipal tasks. Some felt that smaller municipalities would be more manageable and would need less resources to maintain infrastructure. Meanwhile, citizens from medium-sized municipalities highlighted a variety of experiences. Some appreciated better accessibility to municipal services and a greater degree of interaction with municipal officials, while others highlighted the need for better governance and more investment in other activities.

In small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), the perception of the size of the municipality varies between mayors and citizens. Mayors of small municipalities see some advantages in their municipalities being small, as a smaller area makes it easier to make major investments. They stressed the possibility of an autonomous spatial policy and the appropriate proportions of land use. Most mayors of small municipalities mentioned that they did not see any advantage stemming from the small size of their municipality, reflecting on the challenges of managing smaller communities. Meanwhile, citizens of small municipalities value more closely-knit communities and proximity to municipal services. However, they also highlight the need for better governance and investment in development.



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