

An introductory study of perceptual marginality in Slovakia

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Abstract. The existence of marginal regions is closely linked to the socio-spatial polarisation of our society. Especially in the post socialist countries, including Slovakia, which have undergone significant social and economic transformation, spatial polarisation and related regional disparities have become a relevant issue across multidisciplinary academic research. This study focuses on similarities and differences in defining the marginality from two different perspectives – one that is based on quantification of statistical data and another based on individual perception of marginality from the position of local mayors. Local mayors, the main figures of the local governance, have in the Slovak system of administration huge responsibility in the development of communes and a great opportunity to improve the status of certain communes, especially those marginal. At the same time this study investigates how the political affiliation and political support affect their competencies and activities in relation to the marginal position of their commune.

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1. Introduction

The existence of marginal regions is closely linked to the socio-spatial polarisation, which can be observed in our society. Especially in those countries which have undergone social and economic transformation, including Slovakia, spatial polarisation and related regional disparities have become a relevant issue across the multidisciplinary academic research that above all attempts to explain systematic changes in the geographical organisation of transition society (Hampl, 2007) and evaluate the socio-economic level of regions (Rajčáková, 2009; Rajčáková, Švecová, 2011). Thus, the transition states represent a good 'experimental' field for research on how former transition and current globalisation processes influence their spatial organisation (Málíková et al., 2015), incidence of regional disparities and marginalisation processes as such. This is not to mean that before 1989 the spatial polarisation and inequalities in the society did not exist, but after the regime changed, these issues have become more apparent and the social (as well as academic) demand for their solution has become even more vehement. In this context, an interesting view is presented by Falťan et al. (1995), emphasising that marginality cannot be understood simply as a status quo, or a phenomenon that appeared after 1989, but rather as a process (marginalisation) formed by socio-economic changes and the historical development of the society over time, influencing the precarious situation of a given region either positively (reducing marginality) or negatively (increasing marginality).

Marginality is a multidimensional phenomenon which provides a wide scope for academic research. However, literature and social discourses usually address only some of its dimensions, mostly on the basis of objective approaches to its study, as can be found in the works by Leimgruber (1994) and Sommers and Mehretu (1998). In particular, these are geometric, economic, social, environmental and po-

litical aspects. A great number of such conventional research projects are usually done through quantification of a wide range of statistical indicators emphasising the social, environmental or economic nature of marginality. Among the most frequently used indicators are population density, unemployment rate, index of education, economic activity rate, and distance from the urban or regional centres (based on analyses by Málíková, 2013 and Málíková, Spišiak, 2013).

At the same time, however, there is the question of the extent to which the status of marginality is dependent on statistical data exclusively? Although statistical data represent a relevant source of information and their importance is undeniable, especially in this context, they do not allow a holistic understanding of the marginal regions and marginality as such. This ambiguity partially reflects the approach of the Italian author Andreoli (1994), who distinguishes the notions marginal and peripheral and points out that not every marginal region is necessarily peripheral and vice versa. For instance, this can be the case of a certain borderland region which may be peripheral in terms of geographical location, however, its socio-economic situation may not necessarily show signs of marginality. A similar contrast can be found in the work by Markuszewska (2015), where she highlights the need to understand the specific character of the miscellaneous nature of marginality in a particular location. This is because even in non-marginal areas, signs of marginality can be found and vice versa – in the marginal areas the poles of development can be recognised.

In this context, McDonagh (2002) explains that the dichotomy between the conventional and unconventional approaches to marginality lies in particular in different importance ascribed to the spatial aspect of marginality. While the conventional approaches highlight the spatial aspect to a larger extent, in the unconventional approaches the emphasis shifts more to the non-spatial aspects. He further claims that "today it is no longer possible to deal exclusively with the physical space, but a more

appropriate model is contemplated with a diversity of social space, which overlaps the same geographical area.” (p. 100).

Following the above mentioned considerations, this study attempts to apply the unconventional approach, and thus look into another, equally important dimension of marginality – perceptual marginality, while building on the concept of perceptual marginality as it was introduced by Schmidt (1998), who puts perceptual marginality in the position of a specific and individual approach. In this context, it can be seen as a subjective concept reflecting the perceptions and attitudes of individuals, where a marginal region is the region perceived as marginal by differentiated actors. Through the analysis of a questionnaire survey, this study points out various aspects in the perception of marginality in Slovak rural environment from the perspective of the key stakeholders – local mayors. Our goal is to identify the way how these actors perceived their commune in terms of marginality, especially when a given commune was already identified as marginal in the previous studies. At the same time, the case study tries to determine whether and to what extent research on marginality originates from the various approaches (quantitative vs. qualitative or objective vs. subjective) mutually correlated.

This study builds on the assumption that there might be a certain correlation between objective and subjective approaches to marginality, however, delimitation of marginal regions based exclusively on quantification of statistical data might not be entirely consistent with the real status quo (whether in the case of underestimation or overestimation of the situation in a given region). Again, the results point out the complexity of both marginality and marginality research and outline both different and similar aspects in the interpretation of this phenomenon.

2. Research materials and methods

2.1. Theoretical-methodological discourse

As it was already highlighted, marginality in its nature represents a complex concept, the definition of which has already been discussed by a number of authors. Since the primary goal of this study is not to argue over the discussion of this concept,

only a brief interpretation is provided, while bearing in mind that the uniform and ultimate definition does not exist. In this context, marginality can be seen as a miscellaneous phenomenon in the first place, indicating a negative status or attribute of an area from the perspective of economic, social, demographic or environmental aspects. Leimgruber (2004) defines marginal regions as those that lie on the periphery, on the outskirts of the society and are not in the spotlight, while Schmidt (1998) puts marginal regions even further away and completely out of the global system. Similarly, Czech authors dealing with the issue of marginality define marginal regions as insufficiently linked to the socio-cultural and socio-economic spatial networks (Marada, 2001; Jeřábek et al., 2004; Havlíček et al., 2005; Chromý, Janů, 2008;), not fully integrated into the social system (Seidl, Chromý, 2010). Hurbánek (2004) links the diversity in the interpretation of the concept of marginality especially with the paradigm and philosophical thinking prevailing at that time, as well as with the theories and methods, which were affected by this thinking. Similar understanding is shared by Andersson (2007), who highlights the changing meaning of this concept and its evolving nature in space and time. As he further points out, even the scientific community treats this term more implicitly rather than explicitly, as demonstrated by the absence of a rigid definition of marginality in the dictionary of Human geography (Gregory et al., 2009). In this study, the meaning of marginal regions and marginality as such is understood in terms of Schmidt (2007) as an area inadequately integrated into the dominant systems and structures and in comparison with the average of certain regional systems, gradually decreasing and worsening its status in relation to the specific aspects of marginality.

The concept of marginality received attention within the Slovak academic disciplines especially after 1989, when there was a common interest in analysing the potential development of the regions of Slovakia, in studying the process of the transformation of the society and the economic transformation as well (Šebová, 2013). Marginality, as a research object, thus gains its importance with the growing socio-spatial polarisation which is declared by a growing amount of research which began to appear in early 1990s, especially in sociologically ori-

ented works (Gajdoš, 1992; Falťan et al., 1995), later during the period of transformation even in geographical studies (Rochovská, Horňák, 2001; Korec, 2005; Halás, 2008; Džupinová et al., 2008; Halás, 2008; Rajčáková, Švecová, 2011). The common feature of these works was the focus on the evaluation of regional disparities and the socio-economic development of the regions by means of quantitative analysis of statistical data. These, as well as other authors built on the assessment of regional differences and the identification of regions lagging behind (marginal regions) based on analysis of indicators of economic, social or environmental nature, which basically corresponded with the basic conventional approaches in research on marginality introduced already by Leimgruber (1994) and Andreoli (1994). However, such a research only occasionally goes beyond the available set of statistics.

An attempt to move away from the purely objective approaches to marginality can be partially found in the above mentioned sociological work by Falťan et al. (1995) or in the socio-geographic study by Džupinová et al. (2008), where through case studies, surveys, in-depth interviews and questionnaires, the quantitative analyses are complemented by qualitative data as well. Unlike in Slovak literature, qualitative research is quite well implemented by Czech authors, who consider these methods not only as supplementary to quantitative data, but rather as an equally valid part of the research (Jančák, 2001; Pavlíková et al., 2008; Sedláček et al., 2009; Jančák et al., 2010).

Despite the fact that many authors began to look at marginality from a perspective other than quantitative thinking, so far, there is a shortage of comprehensive studies (if any) dedicated to the perceptual marginality as such, except from the publication of the Commission on Marginalisation, Globalisation, Regional and Local Responses, edited by Jusilla et al. (1998) who discuss a variety of theoretical issues and regional perceptions of marginality in geographical space. As it was mentioned earlier, perceptual marginality is rather one of the neglected approaches to marginality which, however, has recently come to the fore of geographic inquiry. According to Leimgruber (2004), perception of marginality can be considered as an integral part of the social, so called objective approaches to marginality. The author starts with the assumption that re-

search on marginality should build on social values that form the basis of human behaviour. This shifts the attention even closer to the origin of human behaviour, values and looking at the world around us. Unlike Leimgruber, Schmidt (1998) believes that perceptual marginality does not fit into the category of objective approaches, because it is based on subjective attitudes of people and their own subjective perception of space. In doing so, the author distinguishes internal and external perception. While internal perception of marginality is formed by individuals living in the certain area, external perception takes its origin from the position of external actors (e.g. scientific community, experts) and is thus influenced by exogenous environment.

Similarly, Tykkyläinen (1998) connects the concept of marginality with the perception of the degree of marginality from the position of certain individuals and groups. Moreover, he emphasises that marginality can be seen as a subjective concept because people's perception of places differs from each other and it depends on each individual's perception of whether he or she consider a certain area to be marginal. In this context, Andreoli adds that marginality is a rather intuitive concept (In Leimgruber, 1994).

In this study we build on the above mentioned concepts while focusing on perceptual marginality from the perspective of local actors, who belong to the key representatives, carriers of political power, who influence the local environment and its development. Binek et al. (2009) distinguishes three hierarchical levels of actors – national, regional and local levels. Whereas the activities influencing the development of a certain area, or its regression as well, are the most pronounced at the local level, it is really various local actors (inhabitants, local mayors, entrepreneurs, non-government organisations etc.) whose perception of space should not be ignored. The status of local mayors as a part of the local government in Slovakia is the most important, since they are the carrier of local power influencing the development of the commune. Since Slovakia uses the slightly modified Baden-Württemberg model with the directly elected strong mayors, these local figures have huge power over the development of their community (Jüptner, 2012). Their strong position was reinforced by Law no. 416/2001 Z. z. that assigned mayors and local administration

51 new direct competencies in 11 fields. Among the most important competencies is the ability to create the strategy of regional development or create and manage programs of regional development. Mayors are legal representatives of the communes responsible for most of the administration, excluding those that are delegated to the municipal council (Law no. 369/1990 Z. z.). Moreover, it is often the local mayors who, in many cases, act as mediators in the community, which enables them to get to know not only economic but social circumstances as well. Thus, implementation of the perception of these important actors should be an essential part of studies dealing with the rural environment in the context of marginality, peripherality as well as rural development.

2.2. Methodology

As it was indicated in the previous theoretical discourse, unlike traditional approaches to marginality, this work focuses rather on unconventional approaches favouring qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods are becoming particularly important within the research in human geography (Limb, Dwyer, 2001), which results in increasing frequency of these methods in the geography studies. One of the reasons is that the data of subjective nature often reveal such information that would not be captured through quantification only (Falťan et al., 1995; Havlíček et al., 2005; Vaishar, Zapletalová, 2005; Džupinová et al., 2008). This significant feature even increases in the context of perceptual marginality. Limb and Dwyer (2001) also point out that qualitative methods are characterised by more detailed research, searching for subjective understanding of reality rather than statistical description and generalised prediction. In addition, the connection of both approaches, known as triangulation, represents an interesting and promising research direction in the study of marginality and, as pointed by Šebová (2013), who suggests possible correlation between the above mentioned methodologies, especially in terms of perceptual marginality.

Dissertation thesis of Šebová (2013), where the relevance of perceptual marginality within the complex understanding of marginality as such was highlighted, was used as the theoretical and meth-

odological basis for this research. With the use of the cluster method, she identified marginal regions in Slovakia and categorised them further into several thematic categories on regional and local levels. The delimitation of marginal regions was based on 3 sets of indicators: socio-demographic (population density, population growth per 1,000 inhabitants, natural increase per 1,000 inhabitants, ageing index, early child mortality, old dependency ratio, ethnic diversity), economic strength of the region (unemployment rate, long term unemployment, collected taxes per 1 inhabitants, share of legal entities per 100 economically active inhabitants) and marginality of quality of life (share of unoccupied dwellings per 1,000 inhabitants, share of completed dwellings, share of lower categories flats). The classification was compiled from a large database of 2,874 communes in Slovakia available during census year, omitting the city regions of Bratislava and Košice, the biggest urban centres in Slovakia, as well as military circuits which might distort the final results. The data were standardised and processed through the Ward hierarchical cluster method. Using the dendrogram and cluster method, the final number of clusters was set to five. Centroids of these clusters subsequently served as initial centroids (seeds) for initial clusters used in the method of k-averages. Latter, a non-hierarchical method of k-averages enabled her to identify ultimate clusters of communes. For further analysis in this study, we start with one specific cluster or category at the local level – socio-economic marginality (a total of 330 communes) (Fig. 1), while trying to capture the perception of marginality from the perspective of those local mayors whose communes were in the aforementioned thesis by Šebová (2013) included in the category of socio-economic marginality. In Slovakia, it is really the process of socio-economic marginalisation with its characteristic features which influences significantly (negatively) all important aspects of life (Michálek, 2014). Moreover, it should be remembered that this classification represents a rather exceptional delimitation of marginal regions at the local level, since most often the regional scale is preferred in such studies. However, the above presented spatial distribution of socio-economic marginality in Slovakia in the micro scale corresponds to a great extent with the spatial pattern of marginality (from local to regional level)

as provided by other researchers, for instance Gajdoš (2002, 2005), Džupinová et al. (2008).

Finally, with respect to time and the technical complexity of qualitative research as such, 3 self-governing regions (SGR) with the highest incidence of socio-economically marginal communes were chosen for our analysis (Region of Banská By-

strica, Prešov and Košice). In each region, 2 districts were randomly selected for further investigation. Altogether, 100 communes and their local mayors were included, namely districts VeľkýKrtíš (10 local mayors), Revúca (28), Poprad (11), Vranov nad Topľou (19), Spišská Nová Ves (11) a Košice-okolie (21) (Fig. 2).

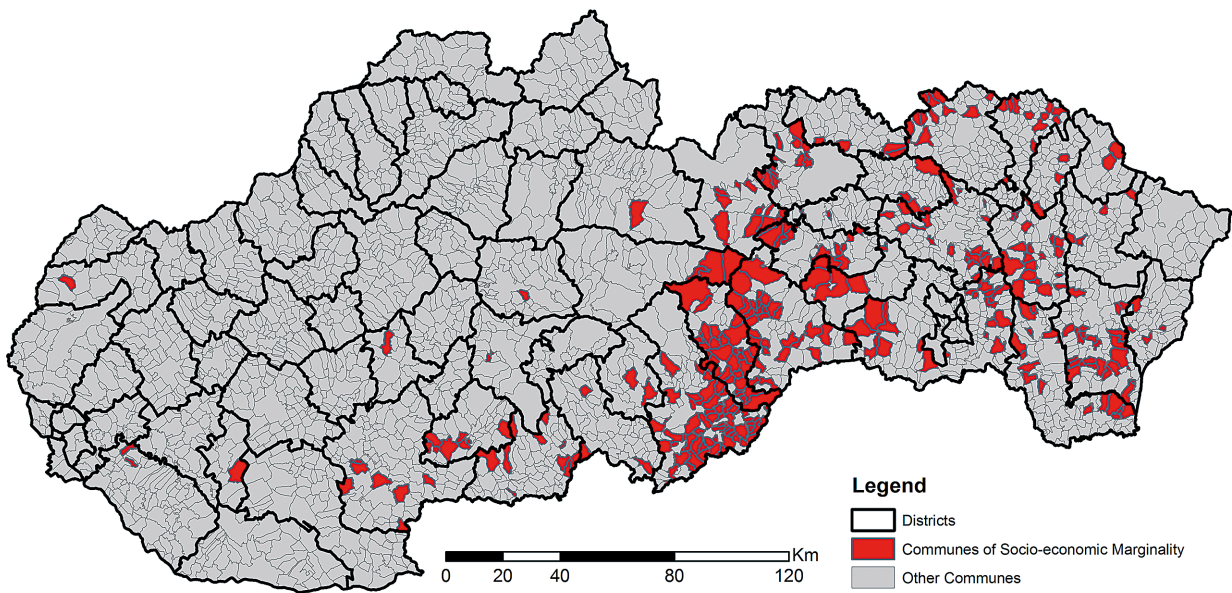


Fig. 1. Communes of Socio-economic Marginality

Source: Šebová, 2013

The data collection was carried out in three phases from the 24th of August to the 18th of September 2014. At first, local mayors were contacted through an online questionnaire, later, if necessary, some were contacted via the phone or in person again and asked to fill in the data. As this survey took place just before the municipal elections in 2014, we calculated with some degree of reluctance to participate in the questionnaire. Despite this assumption, final quotas reached our expectations of about ½ of the respondents, when 47% out of 100 local mayors returned the filled-up questionnaire. Despite the fact that even with this percentage it is not possible to generalise the results, the

data obtained through the survey can be regarded as a relevant output in terms of the perception and interpretation of marginality from the perspective of local mayors, as well as a specific contribution to the study of perceptual marginality in rural Slovakia.

Since the collection and processing of the data follows the ethic of qualitative research, all respondents must have guaranteed anonymity. As a result, the interpretation of the final output is limited to more general graphic attachments without more specific cartographic representation that might enable exact specification of individual local mayors in terms of their perception of marginality.

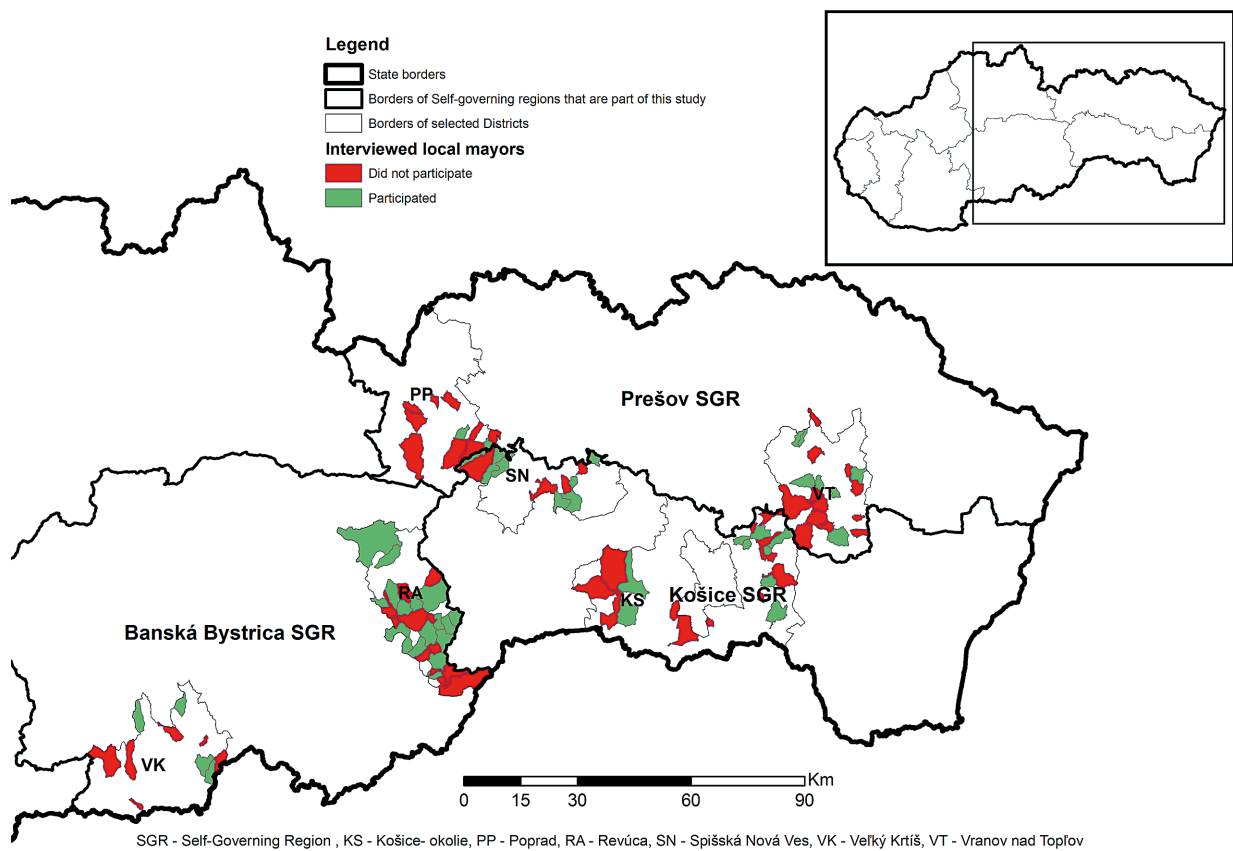


Fig. 2. Delimitation of the case study area

Source: The authors

3. Research results

This case study builds on the delimitation of marginal regions by Šebová (2013) (in accordance with other delimitations), where mainly the eastern and south-eastern parts in Slovakia were assigned to marginality. The aim was to point out similarities and differences between such a delimitation based on purely statistical data and one based on the perception of relevant actors, in this case local mayors.

3.1. Local and regional characteristics

Altogether, the questionnaires of 47 local mayors were considered within our analysis. Female local mayors represented 23% of this sample, which is

equivalent to the share of local mayors in Slovakia after the communal elections in 2014. Most of the local mayors were older than 40 years with at least middle school education, while approximately 1/3 of them had a university degree. However, there were two cases where local mayors did not complete the basic education.

Almost 1/3 of the questionnaires were from Revúca district, where the share of socio-economically marginal communes (according to Šebová, 2013) is the highest among the districts. However, in this case, it is necessary to point out a significant historical fact that the highest incidence of marginal communes in Revúca district resulted from the separation of the less developed areas from the former, larger and more developed region during the formation of new administrative units in 1996. The number of returned questionnaires varied significantly between the districts (Fig. 3) where

the mayors from Revúca and Spišská Nová Ves districts were most willing to answer. When compar-

ing SGRs, only the Prešov SGR did not reach 50% of returned questionnaires (Fig. 4).

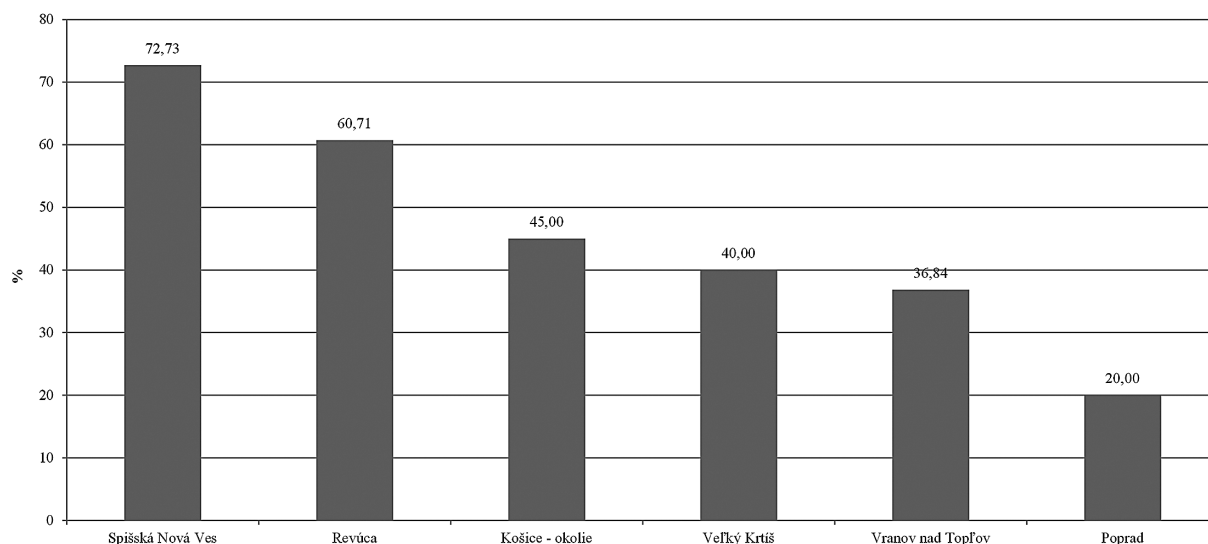


Fig. 3. Number of local mayors according to districts who participated in the survey (%)

Source: The authors

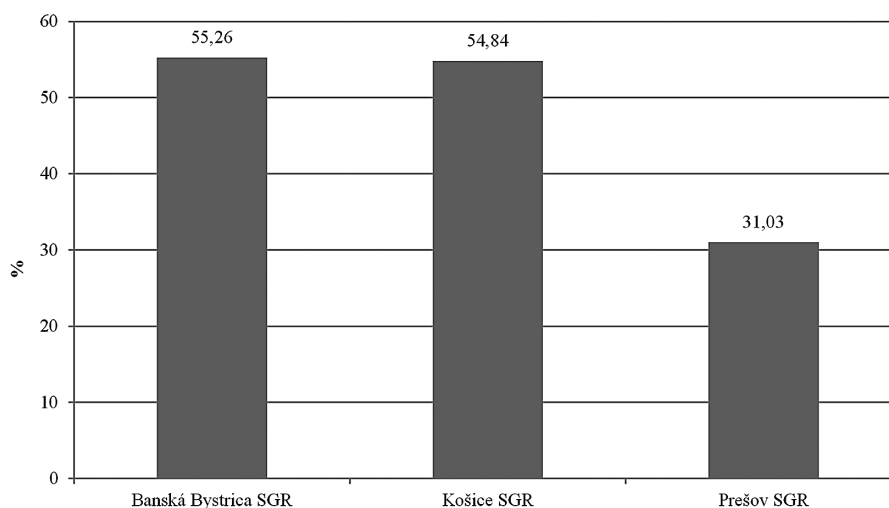


Fig. 4. Number of local mayors according to self-governing region (SGR) who participated in the survey (%)

Source: The authors

The majority of the questionnaires represent communes of 200 – 2,000 inhabitants, while over ½ were the so called small communes under 1,000 inhabitants. This category has a specific position also within the Slovak settlement structure, espe-

cially in terms of its development and effectiveness of self-government. This specific position of small communes in terms of viability is further discussed in Sloboda (2005), Illner (2006) or Bernard (2011).

3.2. Marginality and its perception

As depicted in Figure 5, certain connectivity between the objective and subjective approaches in delimitation of marginal rural areas can be recognised, as nearly ½ of local mayors' perception in terms of inclusion of their commune into a group of marginal regions corresponds with the statistical delimitation by Šebová (2013). In questionnaires, a marginal commune was defined as one that has insufficient infrastructure (road and technical infrastructure, services, etc.) and in comparison with other communes is not developing, but rather stagnating or even declining and therefore is marginalised in

comparison with other communes. In the survey, it was predominantly small communes with less than 500 inhabitants where the subjective perception corresponded with the predetermined delimitation of marginal region, while the majority of its local mayors did not consider themselves to be marginal at all (25 communes), most of the rest of the mayors (17 communes) considered themselves to be marginal in comparison with Slovakia as a whole. Inter-regional disparities at lower hierarchical levels were less pronounced from the perspective of local actors, which points to the importance of the hierarchical level in this context. On the SGR and district levels, the mayors considered their communes to be marginal in 29% and 23% of the cases respectively.

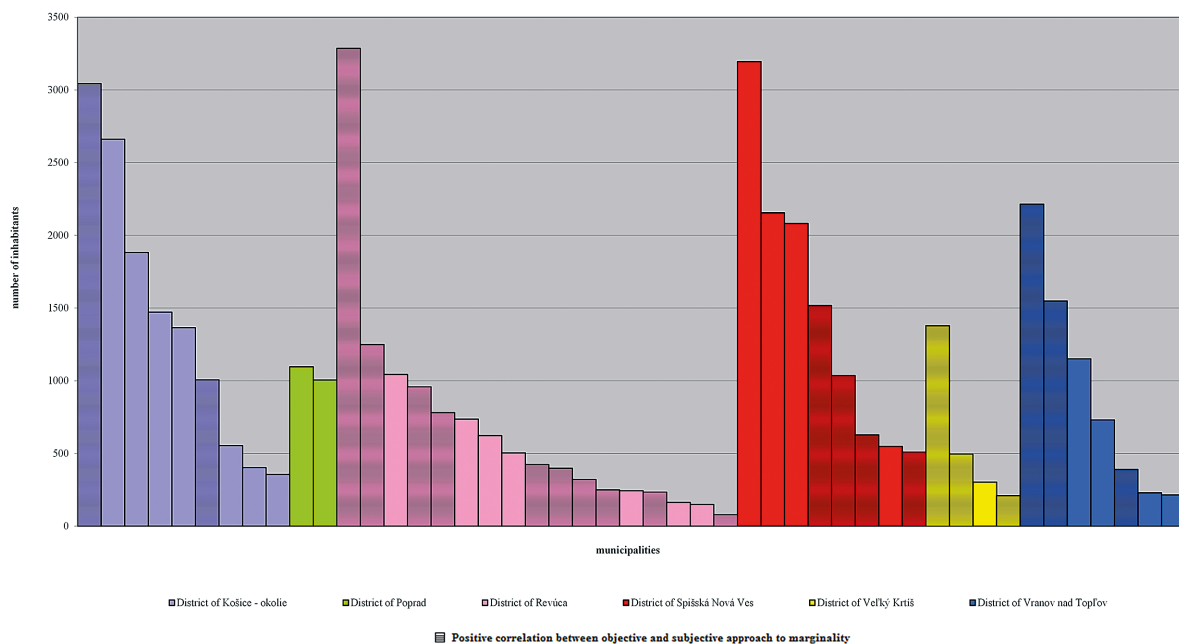


Fig. 5. The perception of marginality from the perspective of local mayors in selected communes in Slovakia

Source: The authors

Insufficient infrastructure, unemployment and a higher share of Roma minorities were among the most frequent reasons for considering a certain area to be marginal. Thus, we can find a certain connection between the subjective perception of marginality and the specific indicators used in the objective delimitations, namely: unemployment rate, index of ethnic diversity (focused on Roma minority) as well

as indicators of the quality of life, which includes infrastructural facilities as well. This points out the importance of the labour market, social stability and infrastructural facilities appearing in each approach. This brings us to the conclusion that it is really these fundamental factors that matter the most in the context of marginality, regardless of methodology.

At the same time, searching for the financial support as one of the key aspects of local development (or even survival of the communes as such) was emphasised in terms of possible ways to change this negative position. Thus, it seems that exogenous inputs can be considered as crucial in terms of the perception of marginality and shortage of these inputs might often result in the resignation of the local mayors, as evidenced in our case study. An overwhelming majority of the mayors see the main cause of their inability to do something for the community in the system of financing and the bureaucracy evident mainly at the state level. Even when considering this issue in a broader context of Slovakia, this passivity is often influenced by demanding administration and bureaucracy associated with the process of acquisition of external development resources, as well as partially with the “right” connections at “right” places, in other words nep-

otism that emanates mainly from the political connections (see the following chapter 4.3). Moreover, as shown by previous analyses, in Slovakia, there is generally quite low drawing of external funds (in the last programming period approximately 30% (Mihok, Bialková, 2012), resulting not only from the aforementioned bureaucracy, but also from the insufficient number of calls for project submissions as well as inability of some smaller communes to participate in the compulsory co-financing (Charvát et al., 2013).

The final conclusion arising from the statements of local mayors is that marginality results in further frustration of people who see no way out of the “vicious cycle” of unemployment – emigration – overaged population – lack of workforce – lack of job opportunities. It is a cycle from which it is very hard for the communities themselves to break away (Fig. 6).

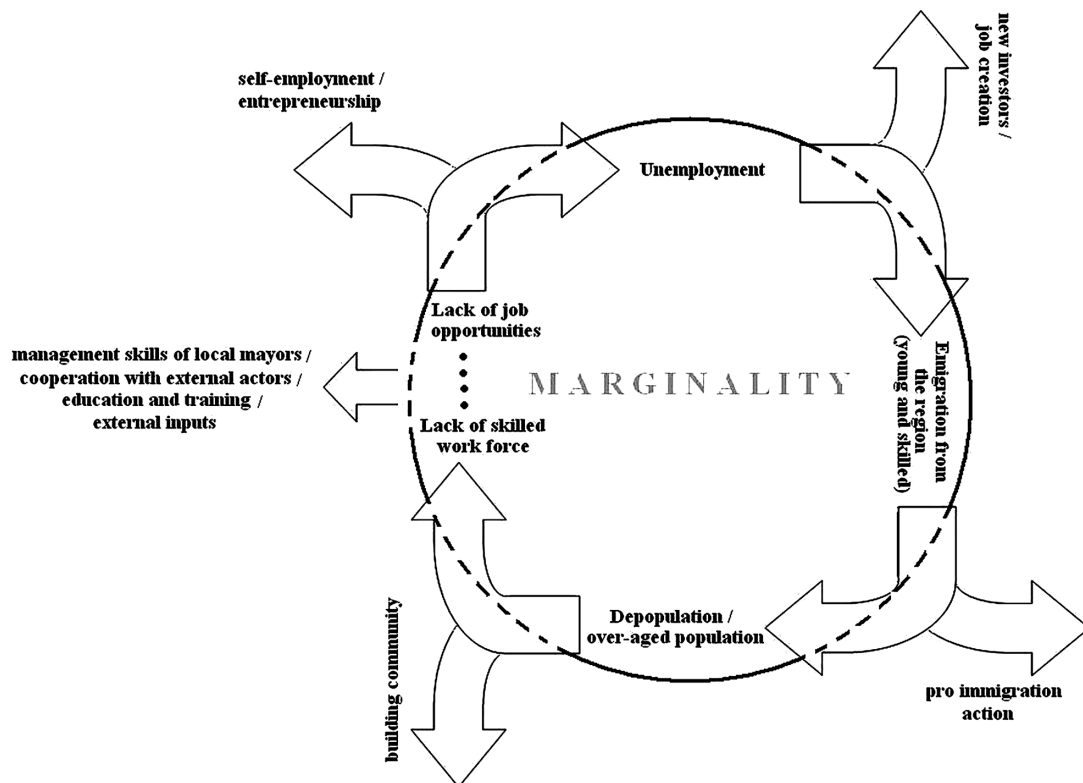


Fig. 6. The vicious cycle of the factors influencing marginality (based on the perception of local mayors in the survey)

Source: The authors

Although passivity in obtaining external development resources was not typical only of those communes that local mayors perceived as marginal, it was more pronounced there. Very few of the local mayors from the survey who agreed with the position of their commune to be marginal were very proactive in reaching the goal to develop the community and to break the “vicious cycle”. Moreover, in two cases, local mayors did not even think that something would change the unfavourable position of their commune. Despite this fact, as depicted in Figure 6, it is believed that there are several ways to face such an unfavourable situation and break away from the vicious cycle of marginality, whether with the use of endogenous potential and the ability of local community (typical of communes perceived as marginal) or with external an influence (successfully implemented especially in other communes).

One of many reasons can be interpreted in terms of the disparities in allocation and drawing of funds within our regional policy which, as demonstrated by the results of the research by Michálek (2014), does not always follow the priority of reducing disparities and supporting lagging areas such as marginal areas.

On the other hand, those mayors who did not consider their communes to be marginal argued mainly in terms of their effort to develop their communes also with the help of EU funding or other incentives. However, both groups of local mayors, though they see the position of their communes differently, see the limits of the development mainly in terms of the same factors. Since the sample of respondents is not representative, the results cannot be generalised, however, the connectivity between subjective and objective delimitation of marginality in the selected regions to a certain extent can be pointed out. Moreover, the results presented above, point out some key factors influencing the perception of marginality from the perspective of local actors and the status of marginality as such.

3.3. Marginality in the context of political relations

In the study of the attitude of local mayors towards marginality and their perception of this phenomenon, the survey also partially touched upon

the issue of political relations and its influence on mayors' decision making. The survey tried to investigate how the political affiliation and political support affects their competencies and activities in relation to the marginal position of their communes. This partial analysis was developed in the context of the previous election of 2010 when the candidates were elected. In the context of the political affiliation, there was no difference between candidates with no political affiliation, the leading political party SMER-SD candidates and other political candidates in assessing the position of the commune to be or not to be marginal. The majority of 64% of local mayors in our survey were political candidates in the 2010 elections. Half of the political candidates were nominated by SMER-SD. However, there is a huge difference between the political candidates depending on how they gained support from the party. Majority of the political candidates were already part of a political party (40%) or were asked by a political party to be their candidates in the commune (43%) in the elections of 2010. Even most of the independent candidates (53%) declared that they had been asked by political parties to stand as candidates for them, rather than seek support from political parties themselves. Only 17% of the candidates searched for political support intentionally. During the survey, a few candidates agreed that having political support is a convenience rather than a necessity in a way, because, for example, candidates nominated by political parties do not have to meet the minimum quotas of 200 signatures of inhabitants for candidacy. Moreover, nearly 50% of the mayors claimed that they sought some kind of support for their commune, mostly financial, in return from the political parties. In accordance with the not too favourable general public opinion, a few local mayors pointed out that a certain relation between the connections to the regional or even state government (through political affiliation) increase the chances of receiving support from the state incentives, development programs or even EU funds. This kind of connection was partially highlighted by Michálek (2014) who points out that, for example, a higher support of the regions in a certain part of Slovakia in terms of fund allocation may be to a certain extent related to the political affinity and department management (mainly the origin and political affiliation of ministries) re-

sponsible for regional development in the specific period. Most of the 47 mayors (60%) wanted, if they were to stand for re-election, to stand for the same political party or as independent candidates as they did in 2010. The decision did vary between the political candidates (leading party vs other parties). Majority of the political candidates for the leading political party SMER-SD were more likely to stand as candidates for the same party. The same applies to the independent candidates.

In this part of the survey, we were able to determine that the mayors seek political support, or rather get persuaded by political parties, with a vision of being able to gain financial support for the commune, resulting from the above outlined beneficiary political connections, since financial issues are among the most relevant in dealing with disparities in marginal areas. It is important to mention that even candidates for the same political party do not have the same chances of gaining financial support. A few of the mayors informed that in some cases whether you get financial support or not depends only on who you know more closely on the higher level (regional or state) government.

4. Conclusions

Although marginality is a multidimensional phenomenon which provides a wide scope for academic research, literature and social discourses usually address only some of its dimensions, mostly on the basis of objective approaches to its study. Despite this trend, another dimension – perceptual marginality, should not be neglected. Unlike traditional statistically based approaches, this approach builds on the qualitative methodology. It was this unconventional approach that we adopted and applied in the research on perceptual marginality within the Slovak context as it was presented in this article. Building on the concept of perceptual marginality as it was introduced by Schmidt (1998), we attempt to study the perception of marginality from the perspective of local mayors, who belong to the key representatives, carriers of political power at the local level, who influence the local environment and its development. Moreover, we went further to investigate how this approach might or might not be in-

terconnected with the traditional approaches widely used in delimiting marginal areas. The delimitation of marginal areas at the local level by Šebová (2013) was used as the methodological basis for our case study research.

The results of this case study lead to the conclusion that approximately ½ of the mayors perceive their communes as marginal in accordance with the statistical delimitation according to Šebová (2013). Although, generally we would expect this correlation or some kind of compliance between the statistically based marginality and its subjective counterparts to be more significant, in reality this does not need to be so obvious. There are several reasons for this, for instance, in the case of local level studies, values of indicators that are included in the evaluation of marginality might be partially distorted (e.g. even small changes in the values of certain indicators in a very small commune might finally pose as a higher percentage change – in this case, statistically marginal areas in a certain year do not need to be so obviously marginal in reality. This partially indicates some limitations of the statistical approach). Other historical influences, such as changing the territorial administrative organisation or socio-political preference for certain territories should not be neglected in the context of marginalisation either. Last but not least, another reason which influences the perception of marginality to a certain extent is more difficult to capture, since it relates to the individual's own attachment to the place, historical embeddedness, human relationships in the area, etc. This observation was most probably reflected in our research as well and resulted in quite a low correlation between the subjective perception of marginality and its objective delimitation.

Looking further at the context of the revealed perception of marginality, we have found out a certain connection between both approaches. The most important factors that the local mayors consider to be the main cause of their perception (or marginality as such) were of economic (high unemployment), technical (technical infrastructure) and social character (high number of Roma minority). Since the above mentioned aspects were included in the objective delimitation of marginal areas as well (as unemployment rate, index of ethnic diversity focused on Roma minority as well as indicators of the qual-

ity of life, which included infrastructural facilities), this brings us to the conclusion that it is really these fundamental factors that matter the most in the context of marginality, regardless of methodology.

Finally, we focused on relations between marginality, its perception and political influence. An interesting partial result was the knowledge that there is no evident relation between local mayors' perception of marginality and their political affiliations, as one would assume it would be. In this context, this study further exemplifies to a certain extent the situation at the local self-government level, and shows the concern that the mayors have when it comes to the development of their community and their perception of what they think might help to overcome the unfavourable situation in partial relation to political connections. Most of the interviewed mayors agreed that the most common problems of all the communes are of financial nature. After the Act No. 416/2001 Z. z. came into force, 51 new direct responsibilities were delegated to the communes, and the importance of local self-governance rose dramatically. Unfortunately, the financing system did not change at all, causing discrepancies between the administration duties and performance of competencies at the local level, which creates even more pressure on local self-government administration. This resulted either in passivity of the local mayors, which was slightly more pronounced in those communes perceived as marginal from the local mayors' perspective, or in mayors' effort to seek political support or rather get persuaded by political parties with a vision of being able to gain financial support for the communes through higher chances of obtaining government funding. This was not only reflected in our case study but in other research as well, for instance, the research conducted by Michálek (2014), where the author emphasised that certain relations between political affiliation and its associated connections and a higher support of the regions in a certain part of Slovakia in terms of fund allocation can be recognised.

Although the above presented research represents only a small sample and thus cannot be generalised, it is believed that it is still valid evidence of the merits of perceptual marginality and looking at reality from a different perspective – perhaps the subjective one, as described by Schmidt (1998). With the use of the questionnaire survey among the

local mayors, who belong to the most important actors of local development, the issue of marginality was tackled and some significant aspects arising from this multidimensional concept were pointed out in a tangle of interface between the status of marginality – perception of marginality – local mayors – local self-government – political support – local development. Thus, several old-new aspects that matter in research on marginality were highlighted and can stimulate further research in this context. However, further generalisation and verification of the hypothesis whether the subjective perception of marginality tends to underestimate or overestimate the statistically based research, or whether such research presents a more pessimistic or optimistic view of this phenomenon, would require further investigation.

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