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THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CHARTER OF GOOD PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN SLOVAKIA: THE INSIDERS' STORY¹

Daniel Klimovský – Alexandra Hrabínová*

The 8 November 2021 became a historic moment for all local governments in Slovakia that were interested in participatory budgeting. On this day, the Slovak Charter of Good Participatory Budgeting Principles was announced. In this short informative article, we would like to offer the insiders' story – or, more precisely, an inside view – on the efforts and activities that led to the official announcement of the charter.

Although Bratislava had some experience with participatory budgeting in 2011 as the first local government in Slovakia, participatory budgeting is still considered a budgetary innovation because its adoption and further use by other local governments in the country have remained rather fragmented. One of the most crucial reasons determining the fragmented adoptions and use of participatory budgeting is the absence of any relevant legal provisions focused on participatory budgeting. The Slovak case is not so unique, because there are many other countries with no legal provisions regulating participatory budgeting; however, at least in some of them there are other tools that play an important supportive role.

The roots of our personal interest in participatory budgeting can be found in the implementation stage of the PARTI 2 ("Promoting Partnership and Dialogue in the Field of Participatory Public Policy Making 2") national project, which was

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coordinated by the Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development. In addition, the Slovak Research and Development Agency approved Grant APVV-19-0108 ("Innovations in Local Government Budgeting in Slovakia") in 2019, and this created a nice opportunity to interconnect a practical project with the interests of academics who were active in the field. The combination of common interests, overlapping efforts, and a mutual understanding by representatives of both projects soon led to some synergies. Participatory budgeting became one of the most important fields of this collaboration, because all of the involved parties understood that this field had an untapped potential that was important.

As the representative of the Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development, **Alexandra Hrabínová** initiated the establishment of a working group on the further spread of participatory budgeting at the end of 2020. This group was inspired by the concept of communities of practice, and it had the nature of a peer-to-peer collaborative network. Several experts with rich practical experience in the field of participatory budgeting became members of this group's core team, and they represented relevant local governments (e.g., Bratislava – Nové Mesto, Hlohovec, and Piešťany) and NGOs and participatory budgeting coordination boards (e.g., WellGiving and the Participatory Budgeting Coordination Board in Banská Bystrica). The Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development became a sponsor of this activity, and Comenius University became the main facilitator. **Daniel Klimovský** was the university's main figure in this initiative, and several other scholars also participated in the activities of the working group.

A kick-off meeting of the working group was organized on 15 December 2020. Since then, meetings have been organized on a monthly basis (Table 1). During the first meetings, participating experts addressed various practical issues linked to participatory budgeting and its use by local governments in Slovakia; the agendas of later meetings were then narrowed down to the crucial characteristics of good participatory budgeting and best practice. Supported by means of consultation with some international experts, this approach led to the idea that Slovak local governments and relevant NGOs could appreciate the charter of participatory budgeting instead of any strictly binding legal regulations in this field. **Alexandra Hrabínová** played a leading role in this period, finding inspiration in charters that were recently adopted in Portugal and Scotland. In her efforts, she enjoyed support from other members of the core team of the

working group. In addition, **Daniel Klimovský** in cooperation with his team from the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University and the Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development organized an international conference entitled “Participatory Budgeting: A Useful Tool or Just a Fad?” from 24 to 25 June 2021. Representatives from Portugal and Scotland also took part in this event. Their experience confirmed the potential benefit of such a charter, and the very first workshop on the content of the Slovak charter was held during the second day of the conference. The outputs from the workshops created the framework of the charter.

In the following weeks, members of the working group – and especially its core team – dealt with the identification of the crucial principles of good participatory budgeting. These principles were repeatedly discussed and complemented by participants of three online focus groups – namely, project promoters, participatory budgeting coordinators, and elected representatives invited by various local governments. This was all organized by the Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development.

Although the very first draft of the charter contained more than ten principles, its final version ended up consisting of just nine: (1) careful planning, (2) openness, (3) inclusiveness, (4) motivation and empowerment, (5) deliberativeness, (6) education, (7) credibility, (8) sustainability, and (9) creativity and flexibility.

At this stage, the charter was sent for comments and feedback to all participants in online focus groups, the sixty local governments that had already experienced the adoption of participatory budgeting or at least some of its elements, general associations of local governments in Slovakia, NGOs interested in the charter and its content, and the general public (through relevant pages on social networks). Almost twelve percent of the affected municipalities used the opportunity to comment on the document. The feedback indicated that the document was “written in a high quality and comprehensive way” and that it was “processed in straightforward language yet factually and broadly”. All relevant suggestions for rewording the original text and suggestions for additions have since been incorporated. Neither the NGOs nor the public took the opportunity to comment on the document.

In addition to the feedback, we received a few other proposals. It was proposed that online links be added to the information on participatory budgeting of local governments and that a benchmarking of relevant data be created. Representatives of one local government stated that they would

welcome a collection of practical experience and recommendations; they would like to learn more about the features and possible outcomes of various budgetary innovations.

The final text of the charter offers a definition of each principle in terms of participatory budgeting as well as a to-do-list for each of them. Thanks to this format, everyone who wants to adopt good participatory budgeting can follow a set of clear recommendations; however, the authors of the charter stressed in its introduction that the charter was not a binding document and should rather be used as a source of inspiration for relevant decision makers and policy makers as well as representatives of interested NGOs.²

Table 1: The agendas of the meetings of the working group on the further spread of participatory budgeting in Slovakia

Date of meeting	Type of meeting	Agenda and content
15 December 2020	Virtual	During this kick-off meeting, Alexandra Hrabínová and Daniel Klimovský introduced the main objectives of the working group and the expected schedule; the members of the working group introduced themselves and expressed their personal interests and expectations regarding their membership in the working group.
13 January 2021	Virtual	A brainstorming session focusing on the identification of obstacles linked to the adoption and further use of participatory budgeting in Slovakia; missing relevant legal provisions and insufficient capacities among local governments were identified.
10 February 2021	Virtual	Representatives of the Trnava and Hlohovec local governments shared their experience with the inclusion of various social groups into policy-making processes and the processes of participatory budgeting in particular; the participants also addressed the benefits and drawbacks of some communication channels for youth and the elderly. Vít Šnajdr (the deputy mayor of Kutná Hora) and students talked about a pilot year of participatory budgeting that involved youth in decision-making and related processes in Kutná Hora, Czech Republic.
10 March 2021	Virtual	A few presentations were delivered during this meeting: the experiences with participatory budgeting in Brno, Czech Republic, and in Hlohovec, Slovakia. There was a presentation on various common e-tools, and a representative of the WellGiving civic association presented the "Hlas občanov" ("The Voice of the Citizens") e-tool.

² The charter is officially accessible at the following website: <https://www.participacia.eu/partirozpocety/participativne-rozpocetovanie-v-samospravach/charta-pr/> It has been also published in the Appendix 1 of the textbook entitled "Participatory Budgeting (Contexts, Methods, and Practical Experience)": Klimovský, D. et al. 2021. *Participatívne rozpočtovanie (kontexty, modely a praktické skúsenosti)*. 1st edition. Bratislava: Wolters Kluwer. ISBN 978-80-571-0442-1.

14 April 2021	Virtual	This meeting was focused on the benefits and drawbacks of digitalization in terms of public participation and participatory budgeting in particular. In addition, the experiences from Brno, Czech Republic, and Porto Alegre, Brazil, were presented.
29 April 2021	Virtual	Alexandra Hrabínová and Daniel Klimovský had a virtual meeting with David Reilly (Policy Manager, Scottish Government) and Sam Jordan (Information and Communications Manager, Scottish Community Development Centre); they discussed the Scottish Charter of Participatory Budgeting.
12 May 2021	Virtual	There was a discussion on the value of a charter that was focused on participatory budgeting rather than on legal regulation; the Portuguese and Scottish charters were identified as inspirational documents, and the participants agreed that it was necessary to look at their content from the Slovak perspective.
24 June 2021	Virtual	The Faculty of Arts of Comenius University and the Office of the Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development organized the two-day "Participatory Budgeting: A Useful Tool or Just a Fad?" international conference, where experiences with participatory budgeting in several European countries were presented. Experts from Portugal and Scotland presented the importance of national charters of participatory budgeting.
25 June 2021	Physical/ Virtual	A meeting of the working group was organized as a part of the project conference programme. While the first group of participants discussed the features of good participatory budgeting through the Zoom platform, a second group of participants took part in a focus group aimed at the identification of possible principles of good participatory budgeting.
14 July 2021	Virtual	Alexandra Hrabínová introduced a set of principles that were outlined during the project conference. Afterwards, the participants addressed these principles in terms of their importance.
18 August 2021	Virtual	A meeting of the working group included a discussion on the fundamental principles of good participatory budgeting: consistent planning, openness, inclusiveness, and deliberation.
7 September 2021	Virtual	A meeting of the working group included a discussion on the fundamental principles of good participatory budgeting: motivation and empowerment, creativity and flexibility, education, transformation, credibility, and resilience.