

ROLE OF THE SUB-MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN CROATIA – LEARNING FROM A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

*Tijana Vukojičić Tomić**, *Romea Manojlović Toman***

ABSTRACT

Sub-municipal government is a democratic instrument complementing traditional forms of citizen participation and as such contributing to the decentralization of the local political decision-making process. The main task of the sub-municipal government in Croatia is to serve as the consultation and communication mechanism within local units that parallel to local councils allows alternative representation of small communities' interests. However, the sub-municipal government has a rather weak position in terms of autonomy, financing, transparency, size and other. Nevertheless, examples of some Croatian towns demonstrate the democratization potential of the sub-municipal government. In this paper, a survey has been conducted in the City of Rijeka (the third-largest city in Croatia). The questionnaire has been sent to all of its sub-municipal self-government units. The goal of the survey was to research their primary roles. The results have shown that the role of local activities' initiator is the most developed role of the sub-municipal local units. They are then used to suggest further improvement of the system of the sub-municipal government in Croatia.

Key words: Croatia, sub-municipal government, City of Rijeka

* Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Assistant Professor, Department of Administrative Science, University of Zagreb, e-mail: tijana.vukojicic@pravo.hr ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-1791-7291.

** Romea Manojlović Toman, Assistant Professor, Department of Administrative Science, University of Zagreb, e-mail: romea.manojlovic@pravo.hr, ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-0292-0180

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role of sub-municipal self-government units in Croatia. Namely, these units are one of the instruments used to increase citizens' participation and their role in the local society. These units are being formed in a narrower part of a larger local unit. Although they usually have a certain level of autonomy, they are under control of the local unit's political bodies. Sub-municipal self-government units usually have their own representative body elected by citizens with residency in that territory¹. They exist in a lot of countries², however, their influence is not the same in all of them.

Previous research dealing with sub-municipal self-government units in Croatia³ have shown that although in Croatia there are more than 3.800 of them, most of them have weak competencies and significant financial constraints. Citizens still do not recognize them as an instrument of articulation and aggregation of sub-municipal interests. This has reflected in the lack of research studies in this area. There are no official data on sub-municipal self-government units' roles in different municipalities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to gain insight into the role of sub-municipal self-government units from their perspective. The research has included the sub-municipal self-government units of the City of Rijeka, the third-largest city in Croatia. This city is selected for the fact that the preliminary analysis using the e-government developmental index has shown that Rijeka has the most elaborated website concerning its sub-municipal government units. This indicates that this city devotes attention to these units, thus opening the space for the study of their roles. A questionnaire aiming to explore their roles has been sent to all sub-municipal

¹ Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, "Introduction: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier", In: *Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier*, ed. *Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 1-15.

² *Ibidem*, 6-20.

³ See in particular: Ivan Koprić, Mirko Klarić, "New Developments in Local Democracy in Croatia and its Neighbouring Countries", *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration*, 15/2(2015): 389–414.

self-government units in Rijeka (34 in total), with a response rate of 47%. The analysis of the collected data provides an insight into how sub-municipal self-government units see their role and what possible changes they might need.

The second chapter of the paper provides a theoretical overview of the purpose and role of sub-municipal self-government units, with a particular emphasis on Croatia. The methodology is presented in the third chapter, while the fourth chapter contains an analysis of the research results. The final chapter is devoted to the concluding remarks.

2. SUB-MUNICIPAL SELF-GOVERNMENT UNITS: DEFINITION AND ROLES

Sub-municipal government is a form of internal decentralization of local units, serving as an instrument of citizens' participation with the aim of contributing to the decentralization of the local political decision-making process⁴. This type of intra-municipal decentralization assumes the recognition of autonomy and the right to decide on local affairs in the narrower part of the local territory. Therefore, it *“enables decision-making processes to be brought closer to citizens, to adapt to the specific needs of a territory and to decentralize tasks that are otherwise within municipal jurisdiction”*⁵.

Summing up from the scientific literature, Hlepas et al.⁶ underline four expected benefits that can be achieved by the formation of territorially

⁴ Sub-municipal government is supposed to enhance local democracy but, according to the analysis of selected countries performed by Hlepas et al. it is not always a case. In some countries, their role is weak or even somewhat symbolic. For further discussion, See: Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, “Introduction: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier”, In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 1-24.

⁵ Miro Haček, Anja Grabner, “Local Sub-Decentralization and Sub-Municipal Divisions in Slovenia”, *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava - Croatian and Comparative Public Administration*, 13/1(2013): 215.

⁶ Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, “Introduction: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier”

decentralized bodies. First is the *civic rationale*, meaning that sub-municipal governance can increase citizen participation in local governance and revitalize civic culture and the local community. Second is the *social rationale* that facilitates a citizen-focused approach to governance and provides feedback from citizens to local leaders. The third is the *political rationale* that presumes the improvement of local democracy and political activity of citizens who can more easily be elected between themselves, but also easier to control elected representatives of local decentralized bodies. *Economic rationale* assumes these bodies can be much more flexible in public management, improving the performance of local services whose provision is within the jurisdiction of these bodies. Also, sub-municipal self-government units also serve as a monitoring mechanism for deviant processes in the local unit as a whole⁷.

There are several reasons for introducing the sub-municipal government⁸. The size of a local unit might be one of them. Where there is a large local unit, by either population or surface area, decision-making and solving a problem of local importance may be difficult, and it is necessary to establish sub-municipal self-government units. However, they can also exist in countries with smaller local units in order to encourage citizens to engage in local affairs. Sub-municipal self-government units can also be introduced to supervise the work of local bodies, as a corrective for decision-making on local interests.

In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 6. These benefits have first been presented by Vivien Lowndess and Helen Sullivan in 2008 and adopted by Hlepas et al. in their 2018 book - Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, "Introduction: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier" In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 6.

⁷ Mirko Klarić, „Nova uloga mjesne samouprave”, In: Nova hrvatska lokalna i regionalna samouprava, ed. Jakša Barbić, Zagreb: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 2010, 295.

⁸ Ivan Koprić, Romea Manojlović, “Participacija građana u lokalnoj samoupravi - nova hrvatska pravna regulacija i neka komparativna iskustva”, In: Četvrti Skopsko-zagrebački pravni kolokvij, ed. Borče Davitkovski, Skopje: Pravni fakultet, 2013, 15.

Sub-municipal government is widespread in Europe, but its fundamental purpose, roles, and competencies are regulated differently, depending on the territorial organization and division of competencies in each country. Furthermore, the popularity of this kind of intra-municipal decentralization varies from country to country to a large extent⁹. The most common forms of sub-municipal government are parishes, neighborhoods and town districts¹⁰. It may have its own representative body or some form of decision-making body in narrower parts of a local unit¹¹.

What about the role of sub-municipal self-government units? It has been already stated that their role(s) vary between countries but also within an individual political system. For research purposes, the most exhaustive and systematic approach to sub-municipal self-government units' roles has been summarized by Hlepas et al¹². They distinguish five potential roles:

1. *Facilitator (animator) of the local activity* - sub-municipal self-government units initiate or support various kinds of cultural, sports and educational events. Within this broader role, they can a) organize various events or b) support events organized by civil society organizations or directly by citizens.

⁹ Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, "Conclusions", In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 248-253.

¹⁰ Ivan Koprić, Mirko Klarić, "New Developments in Local Democracy in Croatia and its Neighbouring Countries", *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* 15/2(2015): 389–414.

¹¹ For example, Hlepas et al. have analyzed the situation in several European countries and found that in most cases, sub-municipal self-government units have directly elected councils (Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, "Conclusions", In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 249-252).

¹² Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, "Introduction: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier", In: Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe – Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier, ed. Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, Norbert Kersting, Sabine Kuhlmann, Pawel Swianiewicz, Felipe Teles, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 7–8.

2. *A representative of local interests in the city* - sub-municipal self-government units represent local interests in different ways: a) decision-making in a limited scope of affairs (for example, small investments or repairs), b) consult municipal government in decision-making, c) lobbying for some actions to be undertaken by the municipal government.
3. *Service provider* - sub-municipal self-government units not only decide on specific public affairs but also organize their performance (service delivery).
4. *Driving belt* – transmitting information about local unit's policies, serving as a means of informing citizens.
5. *A breeding ground for political talents* – an arena for preparation for political functions at the local or national level or a place to recover and re-start political career for politicians whose political function at a higher level ended.

2.1. *Sub-municipal self-government units in Croatia*

Local self-government in Croatia is organized as a two-tier system with municipalities and towns on the first level and counties on the second level. There are 555 local self-government units (127 towns and 428 municipalities), 20 counties and the capital city of Zagreb, which has a two-fold status, as a city and as a county. Municipalities are *de facto* units of predominantly rural character, encompassing more inhabited settlements according to the principle of interest homogeneity, meaning that common interests of the inhabitants represent an integrative factor of these units¹³. Towns are conceived as predominantly urban units and can gain their status according to several legal criteria – population, administrative, gravitational and the so-called criterion of exception which allows the establishment of a city for special reasons and significance- historical, economic, geopolitical, etc. Counties are a specific type of regional self-government units established to perform tasks of regional interest.

¹³ Ivan Koprić „Stanje lokalne samouprave u Hrvatskoj”, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration 10/3(2010): 668.

As in most European political systems, representative bodies are the hub of the local decision-making¹⁴. However, citizens can influence local governance through institutions of direct democracy and citizen participation in local decision-making¹⁵.

Sub-municipal government units are public bodies established by local governments with the task of enhancing citizens' participation in local politics and giving advice to the local representative bodies. They are established to represent interests of narrower parts (settlements or parts of the settlements) of local units. Each sub-municipal self-government unit has its own council (*vijeće mjesnog odbora*) directly elected by citizens with a residency on the territory of that unit.

There is no legal obligation for local units to establish a sub-municipal self-government unit with the respective council. The proposition for the establishment of sub-municipal self-government units can be made by the members of the local representative body, but also by citizens and other groups and organizations, determined by the statute of that local unit. The establishment, responsibilities, financing and basic rules governing the work of sub-municipal self-government units are all determined by

¹⁴ Ivan Koprić, Tijana Vukojičić, "Lokalni politički sustav nakon uvođenja neposrednog izbora načelnika – stanje i prijevori", In: *Reforma lokalne i regionalne samouprave u Republici Hrvatskoj*, ed. Ivan Koprić, Zagreb: Institut za javnu upravu, 2013, 155-156.

¹⁵ Different forms of citizens' participation could be classified into two main groups: traditional and modern forms. There are several traditional forms of citizen participation in decision-making at the local level: referendum, citizens' initiative, sub-municipal governance and citizens' assemblies. There are numerous modern instruments for improving local legitimacy, such as the direct election of mayors, strengthening the leadership role of mayors and other local executives, recall referendums and independent local political actors. Among new channels of citizens' participation, there are public consultations, open space conferences, quotas for minorities, youth councils, e-referendum, participatory budgeting and others. For more information see: Ivan Koprić, Romea Manojlović, "Participacija građana u lokalnoj samoupravi - nova hrvatska pravna regulacija i neka komparativna iskustva", In: *Četvrti Skopsko-zagrebački pravni kolokvij*, ed. Borče Davitkovski, Skopje: Pravni fakultet, 2013, 11-17; Ivan Koprić, Mirko Klarić, "New Developments in Local Democracy in Croatia and its Neighbouring Countries", *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* 15/2(2015): 389–414; Norbert Kersting, *Local Political Participation in Europe: Elections and Referendums*, *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava - Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* 15/2(2015): 319–334.

the statute of each local unit. However, each sub-municipal council passes its acts which regulate its work. The exact number of sub-municipal council members, as well as the entire election process, is administrated and regulated by legal acts of the local government. Each sub-municipal council elects a president among its members. The supervision over the sub-municipal council is exercised by the mayor, upon whose proposition the council can be dissolved (art. 57- 66 Law on Local and Regional Self-Government, hereinafter LLRSG)¹⁶. LLRSG sets the rules on sub-municipals council's work rather extensively, leaving it to local government units' regulation in their local statutes. Thus, two scenarios may exist: a) the rules and regulations of sub-municipal councils are determined in the local government unit's statute or b) local government units' statute allows sub-municipal councils to enact their rules and regulations by themselves¹⁷.

Sub-municipal self-government units' councils are well known in many European countries and they can have different roles¹⁸. In Croatia, the autonomy of each local government unit in determining the work and competencies of sub-municipal councils leads to no uniform rules for sub-municipal councils, and so their roles vary from town to town. Research has shown¹⁹ that legal regulation allows sub-municipal councils to have most of the stated roles and some local government units are taking over these roles. There are examples of good practice showing some sub-municipal self-government units carry out innovative activities that should enable citizens to participate in local affairs²⁰. However, in most local units there is a problem of limited resources allocated to sub-municipal

¹⁶ Official Gazette 33/01, 60/01, 129/05, 109/07, 125/08, 36/09, 36/09, 150/11, 144/12, 19/13, 137/15, 123/17.

¹⁷ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna europaizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 197.

¹⁸ See chapter 2 for more information on potential roles of sub-municipal self-government units.

¹⁹ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna europaizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 185-210.

²⁰ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna europaizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 199.

pal councils, which considerably diminishes their competencies, roles, and influence on local society.

Although there is no legal obligation for the establishment of sub-municipal councils, the great majority of Croatian local units have created them. Namely, there are 3.809 sub-municipal councils in Croatia; only 31% (175 out of 556) of local units do not have them. Among the latter are primarily municipalities (166 out of 176 local units without sub-municipal council belong to the category of municipalities), which are small and rural local units with less than 10.000 inhabitants (in reality more than 85% of municipalities have fewer than 5.000 inhabitants, and 36% of them have less than 2.000 inhabitants). Thus, sub-municipal councils are less important in small rural units in which direct contact between the mayor and citizens can be more easily established and thus there is no need for sub-municipal councils as mediators²¹. Sub-municipal councils have a certain role in the City of Zagreb where they are considered to be the “*focal points for various actors through which they can exert influence on local affairs*”²². However, in other larger towns, the share of budget allocated to sub-municipal councils is minimal (around 1%), which diminishes their possibility of action and influence²³. Additionally, the research coming from Split (the second-largest city in Croatia) shows more than 44% of interviewed citizens do not know what their sub-municipal council does or where it is situated²⁴ and the share of citizens taking part in the election for sub-municipal council is often lower than 10%²⁵. Because of their limited budget, sub-municipal self-government units in Croatia can be

²¹ Ivan Koprić, Mirko Klarić, “New Developments in Local Democracy in Croatia and its Neighbouring Countries”, *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration*, 15/2(2015): 389–414.

²² *Ibidem*, 403.

²³ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, “Neuspješna europeizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje”, *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 193.

²⁴ Mirko Klarić, *Nova uloga mjesne samouprave*, In: *Nova hrvatska lokalna i regionalna samouprava*, ed. Jakša Barbić, Zagreb: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 2010, 302–303.

²⁵ Ivan Koprić, *Uspavano srce demokracije: Lokalna samouprava za građane i zajednicu*, Vrbovec: Avis Rara, 2018, 177.

predominantly considered to be instruments of the consultation and communication mechanism within local government units.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the paper is to gain insight into the role of sub-municipal self-government units from their perspective.

In order to do so, the city of Rijeka has been selected as a case study. Rijeka has been chosen because it can be considered as an example of best practice regarding the sub-municipal government system in Croatia. Namely, previous research²⁶ has shown that only 12 Croatian towns (out of 119 that have sub-municipal self-government units) have certain documents/news on sub-municipal self-government published on the sub-municipal self-government units' websites. In comparison, other towns have no information on sub-municipal self-government whatsoever (9 towns) or only necessary information thereof has been provided (98 towns have published the number on sub-municipal self-government units and their contact data online). Out of the remaining towns, only Rijeka and Krk have enabled their citizens to pose questions to local administration directly using the website's interface. However, only the city of Rijeka has this feature designed explicitly for sub-municipal government units. It is important to emphasize that the City of Zagreb has been excluded from the research since it is a capital city with special status. Namely, there is a special law (Law on the City of Zagreb²⁷) regulating its status and by virtue thereof Zagreb has a dual status of both first-level unit of local self-government as well as of county as the second-level unit of (regional) self-government. Besides, Zagreb is the largest city in Croatia with almost 800.000 inhabitants (out of 4.289.889 inhabitants in Croatia²⁸) and with the largest budget. When it comes to its structure of sub-municipi-

²⁶ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna europaizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 185-210.

²⁷ Official Gazette 62/01, 125/08, 36/09, 119/14, 98/19.

²⁸ https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/H01_01_03/H01_01_03.html (access date: 01.12.2019).

pal self-government, Zagreb is the only city in Croatia with a two-tier sub-municipal government²⁹. Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the roles that sub-municipal self-government units usually have in Croatia, Zagreb had to be excluded as for the above-described reasons it is not comparable to any other unit of local self-government in Croatia.

In accordance with the purpose of this paper, five roles theoretically explained by Hlepas et al.³⁰ has been operationalized through an online questionnaire that has been sent to all of Rijeka's 34 sub-municipal self-government units. The questionnaire has been sent to the secretary of each unit and it was fully anonymous. It was sent in two rounds (13–27 May and 28 May – 3 June 2019), with a response rate of 47%. The questions were designed by using a combination of five-point Likert scale or open questions, and the analysis has been done using descriptive statistics. The questionnaire contained 17 questions, but only those necessary for determining the role of sub-municipal self-government units are presented in this paper³¹.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1. General data on sub-municipal self-government units in Rijeka

Rijeka is the third-largest city in Croatia (120.000 inhabitants) subdivided into 34 sub-municipal self-government units. Rijeka has invested much energy into making sub-municipal self-government units recognizable and accessible to its citizens. Namely, the city of Rijeka's official website³² contains all the information on sub-municipal self-government units' scope of affairs and elected members of the sub-municipal council. What is even more important is the fact that the list of all planned activities

²⁹ More on the system of sub-municipal self-government in Zagreb see: Juraj Hrženjak, "Ustrojstvo i funkcioniranje mjesne samouprave u Gradu Zagrebu", *Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava – Croatian and Comparative Public Administration* 11/1(2011): 43–69.

³⁰ See: Chapter 2.

³¹ The exact formulation of questions is presented in Chapter 4.

³² <https://www.rijeka.hr/mjesna-samouprava/> (access date: 01.12.2019).

offered by sub-municipal self-government units is presented in advance, together with the total amount of funds allocated for those activities. Each sub-municipal self-government unit has to publish its annual report on its activities.

The activities exercised by sub-municipal self-government units can be divided into seven categories (culture, sports, environmental protection, communal activities, infield competition, donations, day-to-day activities of the elected council). Although activities undertaken by sub-municipal self-government units financially have a small impact, the transparency and publicity of their work contribute to the overall awareness of their role. Also, their headquarters serve as a place where different information about the city's policies can be obtained, and the online submission of questions to a particular sub-municipal government unit is enabled.³³ Thus, Rijeka serves as a positive example of promoting the transparency and openness of the work of sub-municipal self-government units through the use of modern technologies.

4.2. Results and discussion

The questionnaire has been answered by 16 out of 34 sub-municipal government units. The secretaries of 12 units have answered the questionnaire, while in the remaining four a member of the sub-municipal council has answered it. Since both the secretary as well as the council members have direct knowledge of the functioning of the sub-municipal government system, these responses are considered reliable.

In order to determine whether sub-municipal self-government units see themselves as *activators* of local activities, the respondents were asked to assess the importance of sub-municipal self-government units in setting up different activities. As shown in Table 1, a great majority of respondents - 13 (81% of respondents), have chosen the level 4 and 5 (average level of 3.93), thus showing that they perceive sub-municipal government units have an important role in initiating local activities.

³³ For example: <https://www.rijeka.hr/mjesni-odbori/bulevard/postavite-pitanje-svojem-mo/> (access date: 01.12.2019).

Table 1: Assessment of sub-municipal self-government units' role as an activator of local activities

| Assess on a scale from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level) the degree of importance you think sub-municipal self-government unit has in: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Does not know/does not want to answer | Average |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Setting up and initiating activities on its territory | 1 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 4 | 0 | 3.93 |

Source: authors

In order to determine the role of a *public service* provider, two questions were asked. First, an open question was used, asking the respondents to indicate the most important services provided by their sub-municipal self-government units. These answers were combined with the question of the height of their budget. Since the first question was an open question, there were a variety of answers, but all the answers referred to communal services and communal activities, showing that this indeed is of real interest and area of activity for sub-municipal government units. Besides, they have indicated activities such as the discussion on traffic conditions on their territory, repairing public lights system and setting up and maintenance of children's playgrounds. Additionally, they initiate activities such as small tournaments and festivals.

When asked about their yearly budget, the respondents have indicated that they have a budget ranging from around 20.000,00 - 50.000,00 HRK designated for their activities (around 2.650,00 – 6.650,00 EUR), plus additional funding for communal activities that range from around 200.000,00 – 750.000,00 HRK (26.650,00 – 100.000,00 EUR). Approximately 4.000 EUR of yearly funding for all social activities is not high, predominantly making sub-municipal self-government units the providers of small size services. Although the financial amount designated for communal activities is higher, it is necessary to take into consideration that they are operatively much more expensive *per se* and that amount can still not be considered as enough. Looking at the total amount designated for sub-municipal self-government units in the City of Rijeka, in 2018 these

units receive only 1.41% of the total city budget³⁴. The lack of resources was stressed by some respondents also in open and non-obligatory questions in which the respondents were asked to indicate the main problems of the sub-municipal government system in Rijeka. Overall, the role of sub-municipal self-government units as service providers is highly constrained due to the lack of sufficient financial resources.

The role of *representation of local interests* was explored by asking the respondents to indicate the extent to which they assess that sub-municipal self-government units have an influence on the decisions adopted by the local unit's representative body. Table 2 shows that sub-municipal self-government units see only limited potential in influencing the local representative body. Namely, only 6 (37.5%) of all respondents see sub-municipal self-government units having a high level of influence. As with the previous role, this result points to the low-medium importance of this role in Croatian sub-municipal self-government units.

Table 2: Assessment of sub-municipal self-government units' role as local interests' representative

| Assess on a scale from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level) the degree of importance you think sub-municipal self-government unit has in: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Does not know/does not want to answer | Average |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Influencing the decisions of the local representative body | 1 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 3.12 |

Source: authors

When the role of spokespeople (*driving belt*) on local politics is discussed, the results seem much better. Namely, 11 (68.7%) respondents think sub-municipal self-government units are essential for disseminating knowledge on local policies (Table 3).

³⁴ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna eu-ropeizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 193.

Table 3: Assessment of sub-municipal self-government units' role as spokesmen (*driving belt*)

| Assess on a scale from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level) the degree of importance you think sub-municipal self-government unit has in: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Does not know/does not want to answer | Average |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Informing the citizens on local government unit's policies | 2 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 3 | 0 | 3.5 |

Source: authors

These results seem to indicate that the latter role is of high importance for the sub-municipal self-government units. However, there are indications that the possibility of sub-municipal self-government units to spread the word about local policies is limited. Specifically, the respondents were asked to indicate the level to which they assess citizens' interest in the sub-municipal government. As Table 4 shows, the respondents think that most of the citizens have a low (level 2) or medium (level 3) interest in sub-municipal self-government units. The lack of interest logically decreases the possibility of sub-municipal self-government units to act as spokesmen for local policies since there is no audience interested in what they have to say.

Table 4: Assessment of citizens' interest in sub-municipal government

| Assess on a scale from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level): | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Does not know/does not want to answer | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| The degree in which citizens' are interested in the work of sub-municipal self-government units | 0 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2.81 |

Source: authors

This is further confirmed by the fact that 9 (56%) of respondents think that citizens have low or medium knowledge on sub-municipal

self-government units (Table 5). In addition, in the last question in which the respondents were asked to indicate changes that could improve Rijeka's system of sub-municipal governance, out of 9 answers in total, 8 of them have indicated the need to increase citizens' interest in sub-municipal self-government units.

Overall, it seems that sub-municipal self-government units perceive themselves as spokespersons of local policies, but their possibilities to reach citizens are limited due to the lack of interest in citizens' part.

Table 5: Assessment of citizens' knowledge of sub-municipal government role and activities

| Assess on a scale from 1 (lowest level) to 5 (highest level): | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Does not know/does not want to answer | Average |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| The degree in which citizens' have knowledge of sub-municipal government role and activities | 0 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 3.3 |

Source: authors

Finally, the role of sub-municipal self-government units as a *breeding ground for local politicians* seems not to hold for the city of Rijeka. This role was operationalized by looking at the turnout for sub-municipal elections. Namely, in case the turnout is high, this could indicate that citizens are interested in politicians who represent them in these bodies and it could foster their political career. In case the turnout is low, it decreases the possibility for politicians to have many voters interested in their work and to provide them support to prepare for a higher level political positions (at the local or national level).

The respondents were asked to indicate the turnout to last sub-municipal elections in Rijeka, held in December 2018, and it has ranged from 5–15%, with an average of around 9%. This meager turnout is one more proof of the fact that citizens are not interested in sub-municipal self-government units, which in its present form cannot act as a breeding ground for local politicians.

5. CONCLUSIONS: HOW TO PROCEED?

Sub-municipal self-government units in Croatia are introduced as a form of direct citizen participation in decision-making on local affairs and envisaged as having a significant impact on the lives of citizens living in narrower parts of local units. Although there is no legal obligation for local units to establish a sub-municipal self-government unit, a great majority of local units (69%) have formed them. There are 3.809 sub-municipal councils in Croatia, directly elected by citizens with a residency on the territory of that sub-municipal self-government unit. However, the establishment, responsibilities, financing and basic rules governing the work of sub-municipal self-government units are determined by the statute of each local unit. In contrast, some local units allow sub-municipal councils to regulate their rules more precisely with their own rules and work program. In this way, sub-municipal self-government units are left at the mercy of the local representative body. Since there are no uniform rules for sub-municipal self-government units, their roles vary considerably.

In order to build upon previous research findings³⁵ on the roles of sub-municipal self-government units from their perspective, one city and its sub-municipal self-government units were selected for a case study. The selected city is Rijeka (third largest in Croatia) which has shown itself as a study of good practice. The online questionnaire was sent to all of Rijeka's 34 sub-municipal self-government units, and the analysis has been done using descriptive statistics. In short, the results show that sub-municipal self-government units have important role in initiating local activities; they are most active in performing small communal services but are highly constrained by the lack of sufficient financial resources; they have only limited potentials in influencing the decisions of the local representative body; they have an important role in disseminating the knowledge on local policies which is, however, limited due to lack of knowledge and involvement of the citizens; the low turnout in sub-municipal elections indicates

³⁵ Romea Manojlović Toman, Tijana Vukojičić Tomić, Ivan Koprić, "Neuspješna eu-ropeizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje", *Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti*, X/1(2019): 185-210.

a negligible role of sub-municipal self-government units in preparing politicians for climbing the political ladder.

Based on the research findings, recommendations for strengthening the role of sub-municipal self-government units are given and can serve as guidelines. These recommendations can refer to the relation of sub-municipal self-government units to political bodies and their relation to citizens.

- 1) *In relation to political bodies*, it is necessary to regulate competencies, tasks, and financing of sub-municipal self-government units in central state law. This would enable them to have at least a certain level of autonomy towards the local representative body. In addition, the increase of their financial powers and autonomy could foster a greater level of citizens' engagement and relevance of sub-municipal government units. Their share in the local government budget and a simultaneous introduction of consultation with the sub-municipal government in the process of budget drafting should be guaranteed.
- 2) *In relation to citizens*, it is of utmost importance to increase citizens' interest in sub-municipal self-government units' roles and activities. It can be done by increasing:
 - The use of modern technology (ICT) for raising awareness about sub-municipal tasks among citizens,
 - The use of ICT for advanced involvement of citizens (e.g. participative budgeting in which sub-municipal self-government units partake),
 - Using other methods for disseminating information (e.g. social networking, community meetings in small/rural units).

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