

Intermunicipal Cooperation in Slovak Conditions

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Abstract: In the face of growing global uncertainty, ranging from climate change to geopolitical instability, regional resilience depends increasingly on the ability of local governments to coordinate, adapt, and act collectively. Intermunicipal cooperation (IMC) provides a governance mechanism through which municipalities can pool resources, enhance administrative capacity, and jointly deliver essential services. As such, IMC not only promotes efficiency, but also strengthens the institutional and social fabric necessary for regional sustainability and resilience. This paper analyzes inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) in Slovakia and its crucial role in improving the quality and availability of public services, particularly in the context of enhancing regional resilience. The study aims to identify the specific benefits, prevalent challenges, and untapped potential of IMC within the Slovak local government landscape and to propose concrete measures to enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. The methodology is based on a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among Slovak municipalities. The results show that IMC brings significant benefits, such as cost savings and improved service quality, which directly contribute to regional robustness. However, it also faces persistent challenges like administrative complexity and lack of stable funding. The paper provides strategic recommendations for future cooperation and emphatically underscores the need for systemic legislative and financial changes at the state level to fully realize IMC's potential for sustainable and resilient regional development.

Keywords: inter-municipal cooperation, public services, ICA, drivers, barriers

JEL Classification: H41. H73

1 Introduction

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze inter-municipal cooperation in Slovakia and its role in improving the quality and availability of public services. This topic is crucial because municipalities, as the fundamental units of local self-government, face challenges such as limited financial resources, vertical fiscal imbalance, and a lack of personnel. Inter-municipal cooperation offers a potential solution by allowing municipalities to share resources, reduce costs, and improve service quality for their residents. The analysis focuses on specific aspects of IMC, including its advantages, challenges, and potential for future development, to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue in Slovakia. This research is particularly relevant for the broader European context, as many EU member states grapple with local government fragmentation and the need to enhance service delivery efficiency and regional resilience through collaborative mechanisms.

Currently, IMC is a subject of extensive research and discussion as it offers benefits such as economies of scale, better adaptation of services to local needs, and increased efficiency of public administration. However, cooperation among municipalities also faces several challenges, including administrative complexity, differing priorities, and a lack of funding (Nižňanský et al., 2009).

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The paper's methodology is based on a questionnaire survey conducted among Slovak municipalities. The goal is to identify the main reasons for IMC, its benefits and obstacles, and to propose measures to increase its efficiency. The paper is structured into several chapters, each contributing to the overall objective. This chapter provides an introduction to the topic, while subsequent sections will cover the theoretical framework, research methodology, analysis of findings, and a final conclusion with recommendations.

2. Theoretical Background

Inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) in the provision of public services is a mechanism by which municipalities jointly address local self-government tasks to more effectively use available resources, improve service quality, and optimize costs. This model of cooperation is based on the principles of decentralization and subsidiarity, allowing municipalities to collectively respond to challenges they would be unable to manage individually. Theoretically, IMC is based on concepts of public administration, fiscal decentralization, and institutional economics. It also involves the issues of collective action and the dilemmas of cooperation that can arise from the different interests of individual self-governing bodies. Key success factors include the legislative framework, availability of financial resources, administrative capacity, and the willingness of municipalities to engage in joint projects.

The following sections will focus on the legal, economic, and organizational aspects of IMC, reflecting its advantages, challenges, and specific forms of cooperation in both the Slovak and international contexts. According to Act No. 479/2010 Coll. on municipal government, a municipality is an independent territorial self-governing unit. Its primary task is to ensure the development of the territory and meet the needs of residents through services. Fiscal decentralization, according to Feld and Kirchgaessner (2001), offers benefits such as more efficient expenditures and better tailoring of services to local needs, while a lack of funding can lead to a decrease in service quality (Buchanan, 1997).

A common problem for local governments is vertical fiscal imbalance, where revenues do not match expenditures. This often manifests in public services like road maintenance or water supply systems. Remunicipalization—the return of services to municipal management—is one response to dissatisfaction with privately contracted services. Another solution is IMC, which allows municipalities to share resources and improve services (Gajdoš, 2006).

Despite the advantages, IMC faces challenges such as varying levels of development and needs among municipalities, which can complicate consensus. Additionally, a lack of funding and personnel required for project coordination and implementation can be a significant obstacle (Pusta, Dolna, 2010). State and international support can play a crucial role in overcoming these obstacles, as can financial aid and the exchange of experiences from abroad. The trend toward collaborative governance has intensified due to the realization that complex challenges, such as implementing the sustainable development goals or ensuring effective crisis management, transcend individual municipal boundaries (Sorensen & Torfing, 2021). Contemporary literature emphasizes the shift from purely cost-driven cooperation to resilience-driven and strategic collaboration, focusing on building regional capacity for adaptation to shocks and long-term sustainability. (Feiock, 2013; Gajdoš, 2013; Teles & Swianiewicz, 2018).

IMC also has the potential to bridge gaps in service provision resulting from inadequate resources or capacities of individual municipalities. Smaller municipalities can achieve better results in public services like education, healthcare, or transport through cooperation. Furthermore, IMC can contribute to regional development and increase the region's attractiveness to investors and tourists. An example of successful IMC is the creation of micro-regions that can more effectively apply for EU and national grants.

To function effectively, IMC requires clear rules and mechanisms for management and control, including setting responsibilities and transparently allocating finances. The similarities and differences between potential partners are also important. Homophily (similarity) provides protection against power asymmetry and facilitates a fair distribution of benefits (Gerber, Henry, Lubell, 2013).

The Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework provides a lens for understanding the dilemmas of IMC. It helps identify mechanisms to overcome cooperation risks and transaction costs. These dilemmas arise horizontally (when governments are too small or large for effective service production), vertically (between different government levels), and functionally (when decisions in one area affect others). The ICA framework emphasizes that municipalities face dilemmas

such as a lack of coordination, financial unsustainability, and legislative barriers. While these challenges exist, IMC offers benefits like economies of scale, improved service quality and availability, and stronger regional integration and social cohesion (Feiock, 2013). The Slovak experience, as a small, fragmented local government system, offers a high-utility case study for countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, or Poland, which share similar historical and structural characteristics, thus providing generalizable lessons on managing ICA dilemmas in Central and Eastern Europe. (Teles & Swianiewicz, 2018; Csachová & Dická, 2013; Sedmihradská, 2018).

3 Materials and Method

This chapter focuses on analyzing inter-municipal cooperation in Slovakia from the perspective of efficiency, economic and social benefits, and identifying factors that either support or hinder cooperation among municipalities. The objective is to use the Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework to understand the problems of IMC and identify mechanisms to overcome them. This framework shows how to overcome cooperation risks and other transaction costs to create effective cooperation in local self-government for the provision of local public services.

The subjects of this study are Slovak self-governing bodies (municipalities and cities) that are involved in inter-municipal cooperation. The practical part of the study focuses on the self-governments that provided data through a questionnaire survey. The main research question is: What factors support or hinder effective inter-municipal cooperation in Slovakia?

Research Methods:

- **Analysis and Synthesis:** Used for the theoretical part of the work, where literary sources, scientific articles, legal regulations, and studies related to public services, IMC, and the ICA concept were analyzed. The results were then synthesized to formulate the theoretical basis.
- **Comparative Method:** Served to compare different approaches to IMC in selected regions and their impact on service efficiency.
- **Questionnaire Survey:** The key tool for collecting data for the practical part of the work. Questionnaires were distributed to Slovak municipalities to determine the extent and forms of cooperation, identify obstacles and benefits, and assess its effectiveness.
- **Statistical Analysis:** Used to identify trends, relationships, and factors influencing IMC from the collected data.

Nearly all municipalities in Slovakia were surveyed via email using Brevo.com and Google Forms. As of March 14, 2025, 356 responses were received. Of these, 206 municipalities (approximately 58%) use inter-municipal cooperation to provide public services. The rest of the data analysis focuses only on these 206 municipalities that provided a complete response.

4 Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire responses, several key statistics and conclusions can be drawn, providing a comprehensive picture of IMC in Slovakia. The research findings align with several existing academic studies, confirming the relevance of the data.

A total of 79 municipalities cooperate with more than 20 other municipalities, indicating that IMC is widespread in Slovakia. Another 66 municipalities cooperate with 11 to 20 municipalities, and only 10% cooperate with 2 to 5. This high number of participating municipalities demonstrates that they see the benefits of cooperation, especially in sharing resources and costs. This trend is confirmed by Nižňanský et al. (2009), who state that municipalities often form associations to provide services more efficiently and optimize costs.

Furthermore, the number of participating actors appears to be directly linked to transaction costs. The analysis revealed a moderate, highly significant correlation between a large number of cooperating municipalities (more than 20) and the perception of a "Very difficult administrative load": $\rho=0.299$, $p=0.000$. This finding directly supports the core assumption of the Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework, which posits that as the number of actors increases, so do

coordination and transaction costs. A larger number of partners necessitates more complex negotiation, monitoring, and management (Feiock, 2013). The high number of partners (more than 20 municipalities) was also correlated with specific difficulties, showing a link to "Problems with coordination" ($\rho=0.143$, $p=0.013$) and "Complex administrative processes" ($\rho=0.171$, $p=0.003$). This confirms that the sheer scale of the cooperation intensifies the administrative and coordination burdens. This correlation, while originating from Slovak data, provides a generalizable insight: policy interventions should focus on optimizing cooperation scale to manage administrative transaction costs.

The most common legal forms of cooperation are Municipal Associations and Joint Municipal Offices. These forms are preferred for their administrative simplicity and better access to funding, which aligns with the study by Fageda, Bel, and Warner (2010). Less frequent forms are Local Action Groups and contractual cooperation, as they are often more complex and involve higher transaction costs. (Table 1)

Table 1 Legal Forms of Inter-Municipal Cooperation

Legal Form of Cooperation	Number of Municipalities	Percentage of 206
Joint Municipal Offices	131	63.6%
Municipal Associations	121	58.7%
Local Action Groups (LAGs)	114	55.3%
Contractual cooperation	61	29.6%

Source: authors

The main reasons for IMC are financial savings, a lack of personnel, and the improvement of public service quality. Municipalities also reported that cooperation allows them to secure external funding like grants. (Table 2)

Table 2 Main Reasons for Cooperation

<i>Reason for Cooperation</i>	<i>Number of Municipalities</i>
<i>Financial savings</i>	111
<i>Lack of personnel capacity</i>	121
<i>Legislative requirements</i>	83
<i>Sharing resources and costs</i>	56
<i>Improved quality of public services</i>	100
<i>Obtaining external financial resources</i>	78
<i>Improved efficiency of administration and organization</i>	53
<i>Protection and improvement of the environment</i>	18
<i>Securing expert capacities</i>	87
<i>Solving common problems (e.g., transport, roads)</i>	68
<i>Other</i>	3

Source: authors

The respondents, reported reduced costs and reported improved service quality. Additionally, perceived better service accessibility and noted more efficient use of equipment and personnel. This confirms that IMC is a key tool for increasing efficiency and quality in public services, which is consistent with the research of Nižňanský et al. (2019) and INEKO (2021). (Table 3)

The consistency between municipalities' motivations and their realized benefits was also demonstrated through moderate to strong correlations: The motivation of "Financial savings" showed a strong correlation with the realized benefit of "Reduced costs" ($\rho=0.363$, $p=0.000$). Similarly, the expectation of "Improved quality" was strongly correlated with the perceived benefit of "Increased quality" ($\rho=0.351$, $p=0.000$). These findings indicate that the expected benefits, which

motivate municipalities to overcome the initial barriers to cooperation, often translate (at least partially) into tangible, perceived benefits, reinforcing the rational choice element of IMC. This strong correlation confirms the utility of the rational choice institutionalism perspective in predicting IMC success, a finding that holds validity across diverse local government systems.

Table 3 Main Benefits and Services Provided

Benefit	Number of Municipalities	Percentage of 206
Improved service quality	123	59.5%
Reduced costs	94	45.5%
Improved service accessibility	85	41.5%
More efficient use of resources	73	35.5%

Source: authors

Municipalities primarily rely on their own budgets and state subsidies for funding IMC. EU grants are used by about 27% of municipalities, while private and business contributions are minimal. This confirms that state support is crucial for the sustainability of inter-municipal initiatives. The most frequently provided services through IMC are joint construction offices, waste management, education, and social services. These areas are resource-intensive and require specialized expertise, making cooperation highly beneficial. Our findings align with studies by Agranoff and McGuire (2003) and Bel, Fageda, and Warner (2009), which highlight that sharing resources in these specific areas can significantly reduce costs and improve service quality.

Table 4 Services Provided Through Inter-Municipal Cooperation

<i>Service Provided</i>	<i>Number of Municipalities</i>
<i>Construction Office</i>	88
<i>Crisis management and security</i>	16
<i>Cemetery administration</i>	19
<i>Public lighting</i>	10
<i>Transport and infrastructure</i>	6
<i>Social services</i>	84
<i>Schooling and education</i>	75
<i>Waste management</i>	62

Source: authors

A majority of municipalities have a rather cautious approach to the risks associated with IMC, with 65 municipalities describing their approach as conservative. This caution reflects an awareness of potential risks, such as financial losses and administrative complexity, a finding that is consistent with Feiock's (2013) research on the risks of collective action. The main obstacles identified were a lack of funding, complex administrative processes, and insufficient personnel. These challenges highlight the need for systemic changes at the state level to facilitate cooperation. (Table 5)

Table 5 Problems Encountered by Municipalities in Providing Services via IMC

Problem Encountered	Number of Municipalities	Percentage
Lack of funding	136	53.1%
Reluctance of municipalities to cooperate	25	9.8%
Problems with coordination and management	50	19.5%
Employee resistance	7	2.7%
Reluctance to cooperate with smaller municipalities	19	7.4%
Conflicts between municipalities	12	4.7%
Complex administrative processes	65	25.4%
Fear of losing autonomy	21	8.2%
Lack of personnel	79	30.9%
Other	11	4.3%

Source: authors

We also examined the possible correlation between the perception of administrative difficulty and the complexity of administrative processes as a deterrent to cooperation using Spearman's analysis. A weak but statistically significant correlation was found between the perception of a "Rather difficult" administrative load and the statement that "Complex administrative processes" would act as a deterrent: $\rho=0.145$, $p=0.012$. This suggests that when municipalities perceive the administrative burden as relatively high, it significantly increases the likelihood that the complexity of the processes will discourage them from continuing or initiating cooperation. High administrative difficulty can thus actively deter collaboration.

A weak correlation was also observed between the perception of administrative difficulty and problems with coordination. Specifically, a statistically significant correlation was found between "Very difficult administrative load" and "Problems with coordination": $\rho=0.190$, $p=0.001$. This indicates that complex processes can hinder effective management and coordination of cooperation, confirming that excessive bureaucracy represents a significant transaction cost.

Further analysis of the problems encountered revealed that coordination costs and administrative transaction costs frequently coincide: "Problems with coordination" were weakly but significantly correlated with "Complex administrative processes" ($\rho=0.224$, $p=0.000$). This suggests a dual barrier where complex bureaucracy complicates coordination, and poor coordination, in turn, can exacerbate the feeling that the administration is overly complicated. Another finding points to a co-occurrence of resource scarcity, with "Lack of funding" correlating with "Lack of personnel" ($\rho=0.181$, $p=0.002$). This means that municipalities facing one type of shortage are likely struggling with the other, increasing the pressure to seek solutions through IMC while also complicating the ability to invest in it. Finally, a weak, but noteworthy, correlation was found in the financial domain: "Financial savings" as a reason for cooperation correlated weakly with "Lack of funding" as a subsequent problem ($\rho=0.147$, $p=0.011$). This suggests that even when financial savings are a primary motivator, the problem of insufficient funding can persist during the cooperation, complicating the assessment of net benefits.

Municipalities would most appreciate an increase in funding, a simplification of legislation, and better coordination from the state. Other suggestions included training for employees and the introduction of new technologies. These proposals

indicate that municipalities recognize the need for systemic changes to make IMC more effective and less burdensome. These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions of Nižňanský et al. (2009). (Table 6)

Table 6 Measures to Improve the Effectiveness of Cooperation

<i>Measure to Improve Effectiveness</i>	<i>Number of Municipalities</i>
<i>Increased funding</i>	150
<i>Legislative simplification</i>	140
<i>Better coordination from the state</i>	85
<i>Training and education for employees</i>	51
<i>Implementation of technologies and data sharing</i>	46
<i>Other</i>	5

Source: authors

The majority of municipalities rated the level of trust among cooperating municipalities as very high, with 21% rating it as average and only 1% as low. This high level of trust is a key factor for successful cooperation, aligning with the findings of Valach and Cifranič (2021). Administrative complexity was rated as average by 56.8% of municipalities and rather difficult by 19.4%. This confirms that administrative processes are a significant obstacle that requires attention, as noted by Feiock (2013).

In the context of social capital, the study observed weak negative correlations that are nevertheless theoretically relevant. "Very high trust" in cooperating partners showed a negative correlation with "Conflicts between municipalities" ($\rho = -0.125$, $p = 0.031$) and "Employee resistance" ($\rho = -0.165$, $p = 0.004$). Although weak, these results support the idea that high levels of trust can reduce social transaction costs (less need for formal control, easier dispute resolution) and mitigate some common collective action problems (conflicts, internal resistance). This finding implies that social capital is a crucial non-monetary asset in overcoming the social dilemmas of IMC.

The generalizability of these findings is subject to certain limitations. First, the data relies on a self-reported questionnaire survey, which may introduce a risk of response bias, particularly an over-reporting of positive outcomes (e.g., improved service quality) and an under-reporting of internal conflicts. Second, the correlation analysis establishes associations, but not necessarily causality, meaning the link between administrative difficulty and coordination problems, while significant, cannot be definitively proven as cause and effect. Third, a significant limitation was the low willingness of some local governments to participate in the research, which may affect the overall representativeness of the sample, and the variable quality of questionnaire completion. Fourth, the sample exhibits a disproportionate representation of municipalities that actively utilize inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) compared to the overall population of municipalities, potentially leading to a survival bias, as municipalities that failed to establish or maintain cooperation may be underrepresented.

In conclusion, the findings support the idea that inter-municipal cooperation is a vital tool for Slovak municipalities to overcome financial and personnel limitations and improve service quality. However, it requires a supportive institutional and legal framework. The study highlights the need for systemic reforms to simplify administrative processes, increase funding, and foster an environment of trust and collaboration to unlock the full potential of IMC. The strong evidence linking the number of partners to higher transaction costs is a major insight that applies to any fragmented governmental system facing collective action dilemmas.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) in Slovakia confirms its vital role in improving the quality and accessibility of public services. Through a questionnaire survey, the study identified that IMC is widespread and primarily driven by the need for financial savings, a lack of personnel, and the desire to enhance service quality. Crucially, the strong positive correlation found between the motivations (e.g., Financial savings as a reason) and the perceived benefits (e.g.,

Reduced costs as a benefit) validates the rational choice foundation of IMC in the Slovak context, showing that initial expectations often translate into realized gains. The most common forms of cooperation are Municipal Associations and Joint Municipal Offices, which are favored for their administrative simplicity.

The research demonstrates that while IMC brings significant benefits, such as economies of scale and better service provision, it faces considerable challenges rooted in transaction costs. The primary obstacles include a lack of funding, complex administrative processes, and coordination issues. The correlation analysis directly confirms a central premise of the Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework: as the number of cooperating municipalities increases, so too does the administrative difficulty and the risk of coordination problems. Furthermore, the finding that perceived administrative difficulty is associated with the complexity of processes acting as a deterrent shows that bureaucracy is an active hindrance to collaboration. This highlights a crucial, generalizable finding for international policymakers: to foster effective IMC, systemic simplification must take precedence over mere encouragement.

To increase the efficiency of IMC, municipalities have clearly expressed the need for systemic changes at the state level. Key recommendations include increasing state funding, simplifying legislation, and improving inter-municipal coordination. On the internal side, the high level of trust among collaborating municipalities suggests a solid foundation of social capital already exists. This trust is empirically relevant, as indicated by a weak but significant negative association between Very high trust and both Conflicts between municipalities and Employee resistance, suggesting that social capital acts as an important mechanism for mitigating social transaction costs.

By addressing the identified administrative and financial barriers and leveraging the existing high social capital policymakers can create a more conducive environment for municipalities to successfully manage transaction costs and unlock the full potential of IMC to better serve their citizens.

Based on the findings, the following concrete improvements are proposed: The key measure is the introduction of Systemic Financial Support, which extends beyond the framework of project grants. It is proposed to establish a dedicated, stable, and non-project-based state funding stream specifically to cover the administrative costs (personnel and coordination) of formal IMC structures, such as joint municipal offices, thereby strengthening their institutional sustainability. Parallel to this, it is necessary to carry out Administrative Simplification through the implementation of a "one-stop-shop" legislative amendment that would streamline reporting, accounting, and decision-making processes exclusively for legally established forms of IMC, radically reducing the transaction costs identified within the Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework. Finally, at the human resources level, it is necessary to introduce mandatory, state-funded Capacity Building programs, focused mainly on developing collaborative management and negotiation skills for municipal employees, to proactively mitigate coordination problems and conflicts.

As for future research, three main directions are suggested to deepen understanding and generalize the findings. First, Causal Link Analysis should replace correlational evidence; future studies should employ qualitative methodologies (e.g., case studies, process tracing) or advanced econometric models (e.g., fixed-effects panel data analysis) to establish the causal relationship between specific legislative complexity and actual coordination failure, thereby gaining more robust knowledge of ICA mechanisms. Second, it is crucial to conduct a study, which would track the performance of IMC engaged versus non engaged municipalities during major external shocks (e.g., a national economic crisis, flood event, or pandemic) with the goal of empirically quantifying the contribution of IMC to regional resilience. And finally, it is necessary to perform a cross national comparison of transaction Costs; this would involve developing a standardized quantitative index for measuring administrative transaction costs within IMC and applying it to a comparative study across multiple fragmented EU member states (e.g., Slovakia, Czech Republic, Portugal), thereby providing highly generalizable policy recommendations for administrative best practices.

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