

Public Economics in the Context of Local Territorial Self-Government in Slovakia: A Study of Key Financial and Economic Aspects

Lukáš CÍBIK* and Martin ŠVIKRUHA

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia; lukas.cibik@ucm.sk; martin.svikruha@ucm.sk

* Corresponding author: lukas.cibik@ucm.sk

Abstract: This article explores the dynamics of public economy in Slovak local territorial self-government from 2010 to 2022, addressing regional variations and high-performing units based on population size. This study aims to contribute to a broader discussion on regional economic disparities and the impact of population size on the public economy of these entities. Analyzing ten indicators across 100 units, including towns and municipalities, revealed significant regional disparities. The Bratislava and Košice self-governing regions exhibited superior economic outcomes. Units with populations exceeding 20,000 consistently performed better, with the 25,000 to 53,000 range achieving the highest average economic performance. While positive outliers existed in smaller towns, larger urban centers proved more effective in public economy management. The findings call for nuanced analyses to enrich discussions on the role and status of cities in Slovakia.

Keywords: local territorial self-government; public economy; population; regional disparities; Slovakia

JEL Classification: H11; H72; R11

1. Introduction

Local territorial self-government systems form the foundation for community development, and a detailed examination of their economic aspects is crucial for informed decision-making. With local governments grappling with diverse challenges from fiscal responsibilities to service provision, a nuanced understanding of the economic landscape is key. The significance of this research stems from the need to comprehend the regional and population-driven dynamics influencing the economic well-being of these administrative units. This study seeks to contribute to a broader discussion on regional economic disparities and the impact of population size on the public economy of these entities.

A careful review of the existing research landscape reveals a growing interest in the economic dynamics of the local territorial self-government system. Key publications in this field emphasize the multi-level nature of economic indicators, the influence of regional affiliations, and the importance of population size in shaping the financial health of these entities. Notable works (Vartašova & Červená, 2017; Buček & Sopkuliak, 2016; Papcunová & Hudáková, 2021; Šamalík & Horváth, 2022; Butoracová Šindleryová et al., 2023) have paved the way for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by local self-governments.

While this study does not address specific outcomes, we anticipate that regional affiliations and population size will significantly impact the economic performance of the local territorial self-government system. The complex interaction of these factors is expected to reveal nuanced patterns contributing to our understanding of the broader economic landscape. We aim to support an interdisciplinary approach and encourage a wider discussion on the economic aspects of local self-governance, which is essential two decades after fiscal decentralization in Slovakia.

2. Methodology

The main goal of our research is to analyze the public economy in the conditions of local territorial self-government in Slovakia from 2010. In fulfilling the main goal, the research intent was decomposed, and two research questions were formulated:

- *Research Question 1:* Are there regional disparities in the economies of selected units of local territorial self-government across Slovakia?
- *Research Question 2:* Which population-large units of local territorial self-government achieve the most comprehensive average level of public economy?

The research design is structured around the examination of ten economic and financial indicators: Total debt, Debt service, Current account balance, Liabilities overdue in relation to current income, Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more overdue in relation to current income, Basic balance, Investment intensity, Net assets, Immediate liquidity, and Quick liquidity. These indicators, as relative cross-sectional metrics of financial health, were initially assessed during the period 2010-2022. Subsequently, a mathematical operation was employed to determine the average values (secondary data) over the observed period, serving as comparative and summative data for selected size groups and sets of units of local territorial self-governance categorized based on their regional affiliations.

The research scope encompasses 100 units of local territorial self-governance in Slovakia. The specific sample comprises 79 towns, 18 urban parts, two city districts, and the most populous municipality in Slovakia, Smižany. This selection represents a cross-sectional research sample targeting pivotal centers of settlement in Slovakia.

Primary data were procured through the Datacenter (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic) and validated through pilot control using selected Final Accounts and Budgets of specific municipalities. Secondary control and adjustment procedures involve monitoring indicators from the INEKO organization and its database. The supplementation of missing primary data was executed through the study of economic and budgetary documents of the relevant self-governance entities. The total primary dataset comprised 6,000 entries, complemented by an additional 500 entries in the secondary data database. Such an extensive dataset is deemed adequate for verifying research questions and achieving the overarching research objective.

The first research question engages with the geographical distribution of the studied units across Slovakia. Consequently, regional affiliation serves as a foundational element for the research, with the distribution structured based on the regional division of Slovakia into eight regional self-governances.

Table 1. Regional affiliation of analyzed units of local self-governance (Data processed internally based on SO SR, 2024)

Regional self-government	Units of local territorial self-government
Bratislava self-governing region (BA)	Bratislava (city districts: Devínska Nová Ves, Dúbravka, Karlova Ves, Nové Mesto, Petržalka, Podunajské Biskupice, Rača, Ružinov, Staré Mesto, Vrakuňa), Malacky, Modra, Pezinok, Senec, Stupava
Trnava self-governing region (TT)	Dunajská Streda, Galanta, Hlohovec, Holíč, Piešťany, Senica, Sered', Skalica, Šamorín, Trnava, Veľký Meder
Nitra self-governing region (NR)	Kolárovo, Komárno, Levice, Nitra, Nové Zámky, Šaľa, Štúrovo, Šurany, Topoľčany, Vráble, Zlaté Moravce
Trenčín self-governing region (TN)	Bánovce nad Bebravou, Dubnica nad Váhom, Handlová, Myjava, Nová Dubnica, Nové Mesto nad Váhom, Partizánske, Považská Bystrica, Prievidza, Púchov, Stará Turá, Trenčín
Žilina self-governing region (ZA)	Bytča, Čadca, Dolný Kubín, Kysucké Nové Mesto, Liptovský Mikuláš, Martin, Ružomberok, Tvrdošín, Žilina
Banská Bystrica self-governing region (BB)	Banská Bystrica, Banská Štiavnica, Brezno, Detva, Fiľakovo, Lučenec, Revúca, Rimavská Sobota, Veľký Krtíš, Zvolen, Žiar nad Hronom
Prešov self-governing region (PO)	Bardejov, Humenné, Kežmarok, Levoča, Poprad, Prešov, Sabinov, Snina, Stará Ľubovňa, Stropkov, Svidník, Veľké Kapušany, Vranov nad Topľou
Košice self-governing region (KE)	Košice (city districts: Dargovských hrdinov, Juh, Nad jazerom, Sever, Sídlisko KVP, Sídlisko Ťahanovce, Staré Mesto, Západ) Krompachy, Michalovce, Moldava nad Bodvou, Rožňava, Sečovce, Smižany, Spišská Nová Ves, Trebišov, Veľké Kapušany

Table 2. Size categories of analyzed units of local self-governance (Data processed internally based on SO SR, 2024)

Number of inhabitants	Units of local territorial self-government
Up to 10,000 inhabitants	Banská Štiavnica, Fiľakovo, Krompachy, Modra, Sečovce, Smižany, Stará Turá, Štúrovo, Šurany, Tvrdošín, Veľké Kapušany, Veľký Meder, Vráble
10,000 to 15,000 inhabitants	Bytča, Detva, Holíč, Kolárovo, Kysucké Nové Mesto, Levoča, Moldava nad Bodvou, Myjava, Nová Dubnica, Revúca, Sabinov, Stropkov, Stupava, Svidník, Šamorín, Veľký Krtíš, Zlaté Moravce
15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants	Bánovce nad Bebravou, Dolný Kubín, Galanta, Handlová, Kežmarok, Malacky, Nové Mesto nad Váhom, Púchov, Rožňava, Senica, Sered', Skalica, Snina, Stará Ľubovňa, Žiar nad Hronom
20,000 to 25,000 inhabitants	Brezno, Čadca, Dubnica nad Váhom, Dunajská Streda, Hlohovec, Partizánske, Pezinok, Rimavská Sobota, Senec, Šaľa, Vranov nad Topľou, Trebišov
25,000 to 53,000 inhabitants	Lučenec, Piešťany, Ružomberok, Topoľčany, Bardejov, Humenné, Levice, Liptovský Mikuláš, Komárno, Michalovce, Nové Zámky, Považská Bystrica, Spišská Nová Ves, Martin, Poprad, Prievidza, Zvolen
Regional cities	Banská Bystrica, Bratislava, Košice, Nitra, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava, Žilina

The second research dimension is constructed based on the population size of the units under examination. Precise data on the number of inhabitants for individual towns, municipalities, and city districts are derived from the database of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SO SR), reflecting the most current values for the year 2021.

To compare and evaluate such a volume of data and autonomous variables, we created a simple overview table. Based on the average value during the years 2010-2022, the table determined the ranking of individual groups of units of local territorial self-government in

Slovakia. The better the average values a specific regional and size group/category exhibits, the better placement it achieves. The best ranking of variables will be at position 1. The second-best will be at position 2, and so on until the worst results, which will be values 8 (geographic aspect) and 6 (size category). In the event of a scenario where two specific groups/categories attain identical mean values, their ranking will be averaged (e.g., if they share the third and fourth lowest debt levels, their resultant ranking will be 3.5). For evaluating positive or negative outcomes, we use the classic premise (Table 3).

Table 3. Rating of variables and ranking determination

Variable	Positive aspect	Negative aspect
Total debt	Low	High
Debt service	Low	High
Current account balance	High	Low
Liabilities overdue in relation to current income	Low	High
Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more overdue in relation to current income	Low	High
Basic balance	High	Low
Investment intensity	High	Low
Net assets	High	Low
Immediate liquidity	High	Low
Quick liquidity	High	Low

This ranking, albeit relative, provides a streamlined capture of the results, acknowledging the diversity of the research sample and the multifaceted economic and financial indicators under consideration. In essence, the methodological approach applied herein aims to present a heretofore absent cross-sectional perspective on the public economy of local territorial self-governance in Slovakia, emphasizing potential regional disparities and the juxtaposition of results based on the population size of the most significant components of local territorial self-governance.

Given the constraints of the research and the limitations of this article, detailed findings cannot be exhaustively expounded. Thus, there exists substantial opportunity for identifying the most influential determinants shaping our findings. The limits of the research encompass specifically curated indicators, the designated research subject, the chosen sample, and the temporal framework. The authors acknowledge that alterations in the configuration of variables, indicators, and research temporalities could potentially yield divergent outcomes from those expounded by the authors. Consequently, it is imperative to comprehend and construe the research within the specified intents and declared methodological approaches.

3. Results

The outcomes of our investigation encompass the verification of two research questions focused on the analysis of the public economy within the context of local self-government in Slovakia spanning the years 2010 to 2022. Consequently, we will divide this section into two subsections.

3.1. Economic Outcomes of Local Self-Government in Terms of Regional Affiliation

Our research sample of 100 examined local self-governments was redistributed across eight regional self-governments. The average results of individual regional groups of self-governments in all 10 observed variables are comprehensively depicted in Figure 1.

Significant variations in total debt are evident among regions, with Trenčín self-governing region having the highest total debt (24.16%) and Bratislava self-governing region the lowest (11.56%). These differences may reflect diverse approaches to financing and indebtedness in respective areas. The basic balance value in the Nitra self-governing region is notably negative (-3.39%), indicating potential financial instability. Conversely, Košice self-governing region exhibits a positive value (2.95%), signaling a robust financial position.

Trenčín self-governing region and Košice self-governing region demonstrate the highest investment intensity (9.69% and 9.14%, respectively), indicating their strong commitment to development and infrastructure projects. The remaining regions fall within the moderate range (average 7.87%). The Bratislava self-governing region excels in immediate liquidity (311.20%), signifying a high ability to cover short-term obligations. The average liquidity across regions is 220.63%.

Values of net assets vary significantly among regions, with Trenčín self-governing region recording the highest values (426.81%) and Banská Bystrica self-governing region at the lower end of the scale with a value of 357.67%. These disparities reflect differing levels of assets and capital in distinct areas.

The values of immediate and quick liquidity exhibit variability among regions, with Trenčín self-governing region and Bratislava self-governing region excelling in these areas. Average values for regions are 220.63% (immediate) and 269.36% (quick).

3.2. Economic Outcomes of Local Self-Government in Terms of Population Size

Our research sample of 100 examined local self-governments was redistributed into six size categories based on population size. The average results of individual size categories in all 10 observed variables are thoroughly captured in Figure 2.

Significant differentials in aggregate indebtedness manifest across municipalities of varying magnitudes. Diminutive municipalities feature diminished total debt metrics, whereas regional urban centers showcase markedly elevated percentage values, intimating a plausible correlation between municipal scale and outlays associated with infrastructural endeavors.

Derived from empirical data, it is discernible that regional urban centers sustain a conspicuously escalated echelon of interest and debt service vis-à-vis their diminutive counterparts. This discernment may be construed as a corollary of a more intricate financial fabric and an augmented interest encumbrance within metropolitan vicinities.

The ascertained trajectory of mounting delinquencies and unpaid obligations within municipalities harboring larger populations implies that sizable urban agglomerations might grapple with more pronounced exigencies in the sphere of extant commitments, necessitating a granular investigation into the etiologies of these disparagements.

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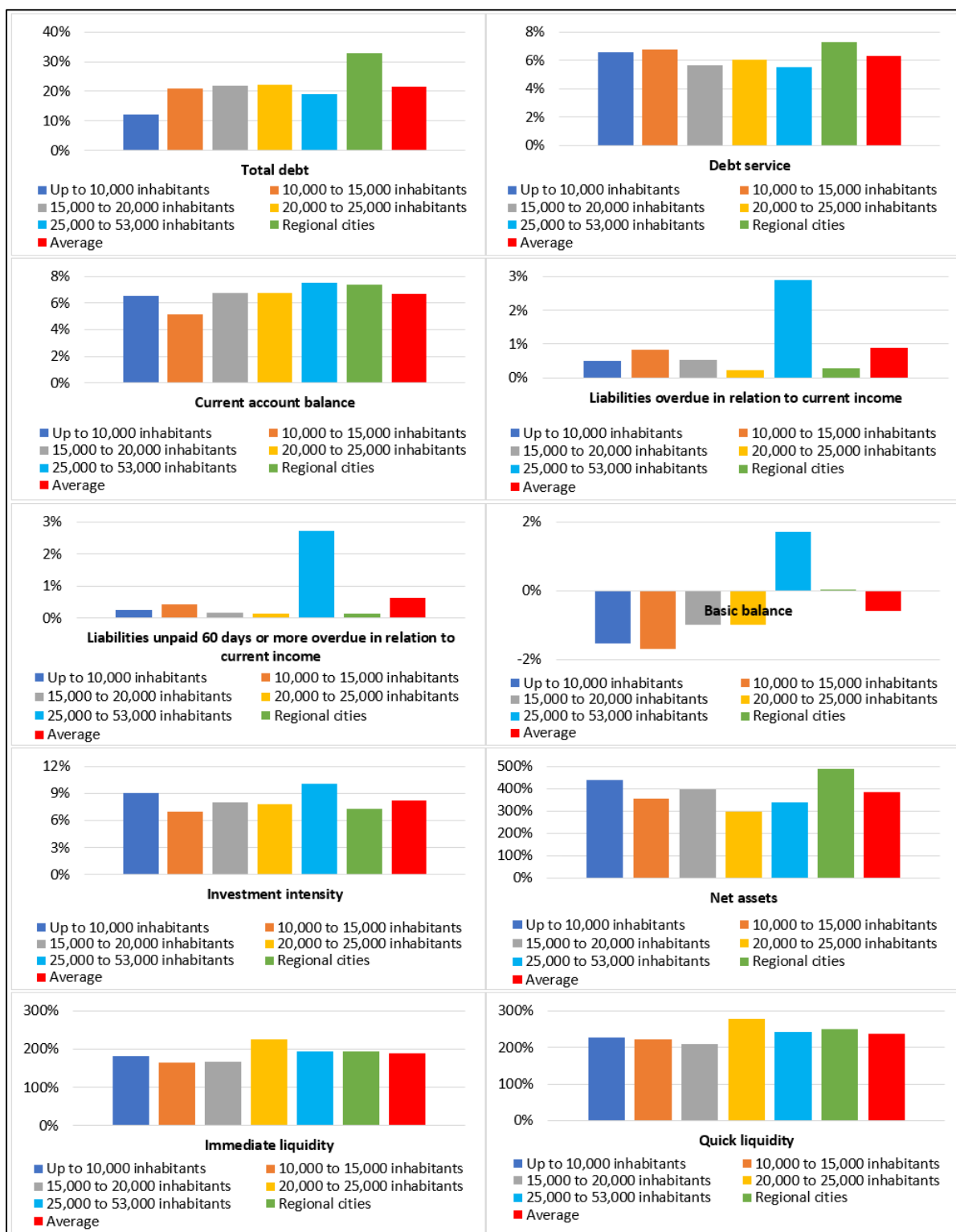


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Balances within the fundamental accounts lean predominantly toward the negative spectrum in diminutive municipalities, signifying a predilection for outlays exceeding

inflows. In contrast, regional urban centers evince modestly affirmative or equilibrium values, intimating a conceivable amelioration in financial equilibrium.

The substantial augmentation in the intensity of investment within regional urban centers underscores their dedication to developmental initiatives and infrastructural ventures. Conversely, diminutive municipalities exhibit a more subdued intensity, potentially reflective of divergent prioritizations or constrained financial reservoirs.

Regional urban centers distinguish themselves favorably in terms of net assets and liquidity, alluding to their adeptness in fiscal resource administration and ostensibly signaling a robust financial posture.

4. Discussion

Through a comprehensive primary analysis involving data synthesis, classification, and summarization, we have generated graphical representations in Figures 1 and 2 aimed at validating our research inquiries. To address these inquiries conclusively, we undertook the task of establishing a partial ranking system for distinct groups within the framework of local territorial self-government units. The response to the initial research question, which intricately integrates the geographical dimension with the local public economy, will be extrapolated from the insights garnered through this process.

Table 4. Ranking of local territorial self-government units based on regional affiliation

	BA	TT	NR	TN	ZA	BB	PO	KE
Total debt	1	5	3	8	6	7	4	2
Debt service	1	3	7	8	2	5	6	4
Current account balance	6	5	8	1	2	4	7	3
Liabilities overdue in relation to current income	1	2	5	6	4	3	7	8
Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more overdue in relation to current income	1	2	4	5	6	3	7	8
Basic balance	6	3	8	5	4	2	7	1
Investment intensity	5	8	3,5	1	3,5	7	6	2
Net assets	5	4	8	1	7	2	6	3
Immediate liquidity	1	5	7	3	4	8	6	2
Quick liquidity	1	5	6	3	4	8	7	2
TOTAL	1	4	7	3	5	6	8	2

The primary analysis encompassing data synthesis, classification, and summarization culminated in the construction of graphical depictions presented in Figures 1 and 2, aimed at substantiating the veracity of our research inquiries. To substantiate and articulate conclusive responses, we undertook the task of ascertaining the partial ranking of distinct cohorts within the domain of local territorial self-governing entities. The elucidation of the initial research question, encapsulating the geographic facet conjoined with the local public economy, will be predicated upon the discernments derived from our investigations.

The preliminary scrutiny of the ultimate hierarchy discloses conspicuous disparateness among geographically dispersed units of local territorial self-governance. The units emanating from the Bratislava self-governing region emerge as unequivocal pacesetters, exhibiting preeminent outcomes across a spectrum of six dimensions (Total debt, Debt service, Liabilities overdue in relation to current income, Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more

overdue in relation to current income, Immediate liquidity, Quick liquidity). A comprehensive generalization of these outcomes prompts the assertion that urban conglomerations, urban enclaves, and the municipal administration of the metropolis have demonstrated superlative economic and financial performance within an extended temporal purview, as scrutinized through a comprehensive set of ten variables.

Closely tailing this echelon are the autonomous entities of local governance situated in eastern Slovakia, more specifically, within the Košice self-governing region. It is noteworthy that urban conglomerates, urban precincts, the municipal administration of Košice, and the municipality of Smižany have recorded the most suboptimal outcomes (Liabilities overdue in relation to current income, Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more overdue in relation to current income) despite securing a secondary standing.

The scrutinized units of local territorial self-governance within three disparate regions have exhibited a remarkably consonant pattern, distinctly manifesting in the ultimate hierarchical order. The third, fourth, and fifth positions in the hierarchy of superior economic indicators are occupied by the self-governing entities from Trenčín self-governing region, Trnava self-governing region, and Žilina self-governing region. While the specific metrics may oscillate, the inter-cohort differentials in the conclusive standings remain inconsequentially marginal.

Evidently, the nadir of economic performance within local vicinities is inhabited by urban settlements in the southwest (Nitra self-governing region) and northeast (Prešov self-governing region) of Slovakia, persistently relegating them to the terminus of the hierarchy. Of particular intrigue is the revelation concerning the public economic outcomes of urban centers in the Prešov self-governing region, wherein their optimal standing was confined to the fourth position (Total debt). Conversely, these entities routinely reported values that invariably consigned them to terminal placements.

In the authentication of the primary research question, regional differentials in the governance of selected entities within the purview of local territorial self-governance in Slovakia have been irrefutably corroborated. The scrutiny and correlation of foundational data elucidated that entities situated within the Bratislava and Košice self-governing regions manifested significantly superior outcomes across ten selected indicators of economic disposition. The urban precincts within these regions emerged as paragons, registering some of the most commendable values among the entire gamut of scrutinized economic indicators. By contrast, urban centers within the Nitra and Prešov self-governing regions consistently found themselves positioned at the nadir, manifestly indicating a profound incongruity in the outcomes of their economic endeavors and financial situations.

The second research task was designed to identify optimal economic units of territorial self-government based on ten observed indicators in relation to the size of the population. The resulting final ranking of size groups clearly identifies which cities with a high population achieved the best results during the years 2021-2022.

Table 5. Ranking of analyzed units of local self-government by population size (number of inhabitants):

	Up to 10,000	10,000- 15,000	15,000- 20,000	20,000- 25,000	25,000- 53,000	Regional cities
Total debt	1	3	4	5	2	6
Debt service	4	5	2	3	1	6
Current account balance	5	5	4	3	1	2
Liabilities overdue in relation to current income	3	5	4	1	6	2
Liabilities unpaid 60 days or more overdue in relation to current income	4	5	3	2	6	1
Basic balance	5	6	3,5	3,5	1	2
Investment intensity	2	6	3	4	1	5
Net assets	2	5	3	6	4	1
Immediate liquidity	4	6	5	1	3	2
Quick liquidity	4	5	6	1	3	2
TOTAL	4	6	5	3	1	2

The results of the ranking bring significant findings. In general, based on the conducted analysis, it can be stated that significantly worse results in the observed ten indicators were achieved by smaller territorial units. The specific threshold or boundary is the number of inhabitants up to 20,000, and the analyzed territorial units in this group show more negative data than larger units. Selected cities belonging to the category of more than 20,000 inhabitants and regional cities achieved, on average, distinctly better levels of economic indicators of financial health. The difference in the ranking of the first three size categories is minimal. For the size category of cities that exhibit the best average results in the ten observed indicators, based on our research, we can designate the category of 25,000 to 53,000 inhabitants, closely followed by regional cities and the size category of 20,000 to 25,000 inhabitants. At the end of the ranking and the metaphorical ladder, cities belonging to the category of 10,000 to 15,000 inhabitants settled.

To verify and qualify the answer to the second research question, it can be stated that comprehensively, the highest average level of public economy is achieved in Slovakia by territorial units with a population higher than 20,000 inhabitants. Our research indicates that the most optimal and best values of the observed indicators were recorded in cities with a population from 25,000 to 53,000 inhabitants. This result suggests that larger Slovak urban agglomerations and entities are more effective in managing their public economy.

Regional affiliation likely plays a significant role. Cities in the Bratislava and Košice self-governing region appear to achieve better results in many monitored indicators. The reasons may vary – from better economic infrastructure and increased investment influx to more effective financial management.

Another factor is population size. In general, cities with a higher number of inhabitants tend to achieve better results. Cities with a population exceeding 20,000 exhibit better indicators of economic stability compared to smaller towns. Of course, even in other smaller towns, above-average and positive values of the investigated ten variables can be found. However, when generalizing the results for entire size groups, it is more of an exception.

Given the apparent regional disparities in the economic performance of individual territorial self-governments, it is imperative for policymakers to consider the implementation

of targeted policies and interventions to address specific issues in areas with lower economic indicators. A holistic understanding of the unique economic dynamics of each region is crucial for effectively designing policies.

Regions with lower economic indicators could benefit from initiatives that promote economic development, such as improving economic infrastructure, attracting investments, and creating a business-friendly environment. Identifying and addressing factors contributing to inequalities can contribute to the formulation of targeted strategies.

Cities and local self-governments, especially those with lower economic indicators, could benefit from training programs focused on efficient financial management. Enhancing financial literacy and adopting best practices in financial management can contribute to improving economic stability.

Considering the correlation between population size and economic performance, resource allocation strategies could be adjusted to prioritize regions with larger populations. This may involve directing investments, infrastructure projects, and economic development programs toward areas with higher population density.

Smaller cities (up to 20,000 inhabitants) could benefit from targeted support programs tailored to their specific challenges. This could include initiatives to strengthen capacities, grants, or joint projects aimed at improving their economic stability.

5. Conclusions

The main goal of our study was to scrutinize public economy within the framework of local territorial self-government in Slovakia since 2010. The research focused on monitoring ten indicators of public economy within the context of local territorial self-government during the specified time period. Individual partial data were categorized based on geographical affiliation and size category. The study's findings highlight significant geographical disparities, with the most favorable average results observed in territorial self-governments within the Bratislava and Košice self-governing regions. These conclusions are further corroborated by the size of specific units of local territorial self-government, demonstrating that optimal results are achieved by larger cities and regional cities with a population exceeding 20,000 inhabitants. The conclusions of our research, grounded in extensive primary data, are constrained by the time series, the selection of the research sample, and the variables themselves. We do not preclude the possibility that our conclusions could be nuanced if alternative indicators were incorporated or if the research sample were exchanged in the study's implementation. Undoubtedly, this issue presents significant potential for further in-depth analyses that can serve as a compelling argument in discussions regarding the role and position of cities in Slovakia.

During the presentation of research results, we are compelled to take into account the limitations of the scope of our work. Our endeavor aimed at providing the most detailed and relevant perspective on our findings within the available scope. It is important to bear in mind that research results can be extensive and complex, and thus, we sought to present a concise yet informative overview in accordance with the defined parameters of the scope.

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