

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM IN THE PROPOSALS OF SK8 AND ZMOS: AN ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE DECENTRALIZATION VISION OF TERRITORIAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

PhDr. Simona Kováčová, PhD.¹

Abstract

This article analyses the position paper on public administration reform prepared by the Association of Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia (SK8) and the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia (ZMOS). The aim of the article is to assess the form of public administration reform proposed by these two representative associations of territorial self-government, identify the systemic problems they highlight, and examine the potential implications of their proposals for the relationship between the state, municipalities, and self-governing regions. The analysis focuses on five key areas: the constitutional and legal framework of territorial self-government, territorial-administrative organization, the model of public administration, the distribution of competences, and financing. The findings indicate that SK8 and ZMOS do not merely propose a set of technical administrative adjustments but rather present a broader vision for restructuring the relationship between central government and territorial self-government. The core of their proposal lies in strengthening decentralization, stabilizing the legal status of self-government, rationalizing state administration, redefining the allocation of competences, and establishing a more predictable system of public financing.

Keywords: *public administration, territorial self-government, decentralization, SK8, ZMOS, competences, financing, public administration reform*

Introduction

Public administration in Slovakia has long been characterized by tensions between the centralizing tendencies of the state and the decentralization demands of territorial self-government. The reforms implemented at the turn of the millennium formally strengthened municipalities and self-governing regions; however, a number of structural problems have remained unresolved in practice. Among the most significant are the fragmentation of the municipal structure, unclear divisions of competences, limited financial instruments available to local governments, duplication between state administration and self-government, and the low predictability of interventions by the central government.

The position paper prepared by SK8 and ZMOS represents a response to these challenges. Its significance lies primarily in the fact that it constitutes a joint initiative of both the local and regional levels of self-government. This is important because public administration reform is often complicated by divergent interests among municipalities, cities, regions, and the state.

¹ Faculty of political sciences and international relations, Matej Bel University, simona.kovacova@umb.sk
Orcid: 0000-0003-3446-7920

SK8 and ZMOS seek to formulate a common framework in which territorial self-government would function as a stable, institutionally capable, and respected partner of the state.

The authors of the document emphasize that it is not intended to serve as a final legislative proposal but rather as a contribution to professional and political debate. As they state, "we present our position paper as an initial document for discussion with other partners" (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 5). This statement is important because the document should be understood as a strategic position of territorial self-government rather than as a fully elaborated reform plan. Nevertheless, it contains several concrete proposals that, if implemented, would fundamentally reshape the functioning of public administration in Slovakia.

The central analytical premise of the document is the claim that although Slovak territorial self-government formally exists as an autonomous level of public authority, its actual position is frequently weakened by state intervention. According to SK8 and ZMOS, local and regional governments operate within an unstable legal and financial environment that limits their ability to plan and pursue long-term territorial development. The document adopts a distinctly critical perspective on this issue. The authors identify as one of the key problems the "low predictability and vulnerability of self-governments to various randomly prepared and non-consulted interventions by executive or legislative authorities" (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 5). This observation captures the essence of the conflict: self-governments are expected to bear responsibility for public services while lacking adequate protection against state decisions that alter their budgets or competences.

From an academic perspective, this issue can be interpreted as a mismatch between responsibility and autonomy. If a municipality or region is responsible for a public service, it must possess not only the authority to organize that service but also stable funding and the capacity for long-term planning. When the state unilaterally changes the rules of the system, local governments remain politically accountable to citizens while having limited control over the conditions under which their responsibilities are performed.

For this reason, SK8 and ZMOS build their reform vision on the concept of a new partnership between the state and territorial self-government. They do not advocate the weakening of the state or the abandonment of its strategic functions. On the contrary, they recognize the indispensable role of the state in areas such as security, foreign policy, justice, and the protection of citizens' rights. Their argument, however, is that the state should refrain from performing activities that can be delivered more effectively by territorial self-government.

1. Constitutional and Legal Framework: Protecting Self-Government from Ad Hoc Interventions

The first major area of reform concerns the constitutional strengthening of territorial self-government. SK8 and ZMOS propose the adoption of a Constitutional Act on Territorial Self-Government. Its purpose would be to codify the fundamental framework of self-government, define its institutions and competences, and regulate its relationship with the state.

This proposal can be interpreted as a response to the perception that ordinary legislation does not provide sufficient protection for territorial self-government. If a parliamentary majority can alter the scope of local government competences or financing through ordinary legislation,

self-government remains dependent on the political will of the central government. The proposed constitutional act is intended to reduce this dependence.

SK8 and ZMOS primarily call for a clear delineation of the exclusive competences of local and regional self-government. This proposal is significant because the current system is characterized by overlapping responsibilities. Citizens are often uncertain whether a particular public service falls under the responsibility of a municipality, a self-governing region, a district office, a ministry, or another public authority. Ambiguous competences also create opportunities for institutions to shift responsibility from one actor to another.

Another important proposal is the establishment of a right of self-governments to regular consultations with the government and parliament. The document suggests that this mechanism should become both mandatory and enforceable. In other words, consultations would not merely take the form of informal discussions but would constitute an institutionalized process. The authors also propose the creation of a joint platform, such as a Council of the Government and Territorial Self-Government.

From an analytical perspective, this proposal can be assessed positively because it has the potential to improve the quality of public policymaking. If the state is preparing legislation that directly affects municipalities and regions, it is rational to involve territorial self-government before the legislation is adopted. Such consultations may prevent technical errors, underfunding, and implementation conflicts. Nevertheless, the mechanism could lose its effectiveness if consultations become a purely formal procedure without any real influence on decision-making.

The most far-reaching and simultaneously the most controversial proposal is the introduction of a suspensive veto for self-governments in cases where their competences or financial resources are affected. The authors propose a “right to a suspensive veto in matters involving interventions into competences or resources” (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 5). Such a measure would substantially strengthen the position of territorial self-government within the legislative process. Its primary benefit would be the protection of local and regional governments from ill-considered state interventions. However, it could also slow down the legislative process and create tensions between the democratically elected parliament and representative associations of self-government.

From a professional and legal perspective, it would therefore be necessary to define precisely which types of legislation the veto would apply to, who would be entitled to exercise it, what majority would be required, and what legal effects it would produce. Without such specifications, the proposal remains politically significant but legally underdeveloped.

2. Territorial-Administrative Organization: Local Fragmentation and Mandatory Inter-Municipal Cooperation

The second major theme concerns territorial-administrative organization. SK8 and ZMOS argue that Slovakia has an exceptionally fragmented municipal structure. Many municipalities have very small populations, limited budgets, and weak administrative capacities. This significantly complicates the provision of public services at a comparable level of quality.

The document notes that Slovakia has approximately 2,890 municipalities, a substantial proportion of which have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. The authors conclude that "Slovakia belongs among the most territorially fragmented countries in the European Union" (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 6). This observation is highly significant because fragmentation is not merely a question of the number of municipalities but also of institutional capacity. Small municipalities often lack specialists in public procurement, spatial planning, social services, project management, or building administration.

Importantly, SK8 and ZMOS do not advocate the compulsory amalgamation of municipalities. Such a policy would be politically sensitive because municipalities are closely linked to local identity and historical continuity. Instead, they propose the introduction of mandatory inter-municipal cooperation.

When defining inter-municipal cooperation, I. William Zartman understood cooperation as "a situation in which parties agree to cooperate in order to produce new gains for all participants that could not be achieved through unilateral action" (Hertzog, 2010, p. 297). Within this framework, mandatory cooperation represents a compromise solution that preserves the existence of municipalities while creating larger functional units capable of delivering services more efficiently.

Analytically, this proposal is important because it distinguishes between the political existence of a municipality and the administrative capacity required for public service delivery. A municipality may remain an autonomous self-governing entity while performing selected professional or technical tasks jointly with neighboring municipalities. Such an arrangement could reduce costs, increase professionalization, and improve service accessibility.

The document further proposes that a comprehensive competence audit should be conducted before determining which functions would be subject to mandatory cooperation. This approach is important because not all public services need to be provided at a supra-municipal level. Some services should remain close to citizens, while others require the financial and professional capacity of larger territorial units.

One of the strengths of this proposal is its pragmatic character. Rather than pursuing politically controversial municipal mergers, it offers a model that may be more acceptable to local communities. On the other hand, mandatory cooperation may generate additional coordination costs. If responsibilities, financing arrangements, and decision-making procedures are not clearly defined, a new layer of administrative complexity could emerge.

An important component of the document is its effort to strengthen the regional level of self-government. SK8 and ZMOS use the traditional term *župa* instead of the official designation "higher territorial unit" or "self-governing region." This is not merely a terminological change. According to the document, the term is intended to simplify and unify the designation of regional self-government.

More important than terminology, however, is the proposed substantive strengthening of regional governments. SK8 and ZMOS argue that regions should assume greater responsibility for regional development and for services that exceed the capacities of individual municipalities. This proposal is based on the assumption that a fragmented municipal structure

requires a stronger regional level capable of coordinating development policies, planning activities, and strategic investments.

The document points out that self-governing regions have not become fully-fledged engines of regional development even after more than two decades of existence. This suggests that the problem does not lie in the existence of regional self-government itself but rather in its insufficient competences and financial resources. Consequently, SK8 and ZMOS do not propose the abolition of regional governments but their strengthening.

From an analytical perspective, this distinction is crucial. Slovak public debate has repeatedly included proposals to abolish or significantly reduce the role of self-governing regions. The position paper adopts the opposite view: regional self-government is necessary, but it must become stronger, more comprehensible, and better financed.

3. The Model of Public Administration: From Dualism to a More Integrated System

The third area of reform concerns the overall model of public administration. SK8 and ZMOS distinguish between the local and regional levels of governance. At the local level, they propose retaining the dual model of public administration, which combines territorial self-government with delegated state administration. At the same time, however, they advocate minimizing delegated state functions and strengthening municipalities' original competences.

At the regional level, the document proposes consideration of a more integrated model of public administration. This would involve transferring certain functions currently performed by local and regional state administration to self-governing regions or reorganizing them in another manner. The authors emphasize the need to "streamline local state administration through the creation of an integrated model at the regional (župa) level" (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 6).

This proposal represents one of the most far-reaching elements of the entire reform agenda. In practical terms, it could entail the abolition or substantial reduction of district offices and certain specialized state administration bodies. The primary objective is to eliminate institutional duplication, simplify administrative structures, and move decision-making closer to the territorial level.

One of the potential advantages of an integrated model is greater transparency. If a single regional institution were responsible for regional development, transport, education, social services, and selected administrative functions, both citizens and businesses could navigate the public administration system more easily. Such an arrangement could also reduce the parallel operation of state and self-government structures.

However, the proposal also entails significant risks. The transfer of competences from the state to regional governments would require extensive personnel, financial, and legislative adjustments. If such a transfer were implemented without adequate resources, it could overburden regional administrations and reduce the quality of service delivery.

Furthermore, certain areas of state administration require a uniform nationwide approach in order to avoid regional disparities in legal interpretation and administrative practice. Consequently, the proposal can be regarded as strategically attractive but institutionally demanding. Its success would largely depend on the quality of the proposed competence audit

and on the willingness of the state to transfer not only responsibilities but also personnel, financial resources, and decision-making authority.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the proposal reflects contemporary trends in public governance that seek to overcome excessive institutional fragmentation. The objective is not merely administrative simplification but also the creation of clearer accountability structures. Citizens should be able to identify which institution is responsible for a particular public service and hold that institution accountable for its performance.

4. Competences: The Need for a Competence Audit and the Principle of Institutional Congruence

A central instrument of the proposed reform is the competence audit. SK8 and ZMOS repeatedly emphasize that it is impossible to make responsible decisions regarding the allocation of competences without a thorough assessment of the current system.

The purpose of the audit is to identify institutional overlaps, inefficiencies, underfunded responsibilities, and unclear accountability arrangements. According to the document, the existing distribution of competences has gradually become dysfunctional and unnecessarily complex. The problem lies not only in determining which institution holds a particular competence but also in whether that institution possesses the resources necessary to perform it effectively.

To address this issue, SK8 and ZMOS rely on the principle of institutional congruence. According to this principle, responsibility must be accompanied by both decision-making authority and adequate financial resources. If a municipality or region is expected to perform a particular public function, it should also possess the authority to make decisions regarding that function and the financial means required for its implementation.

This principle constitutes one of the most important conceptual foundations of the entire document. From the perspective of public administration theory, it represents a fundamental requirement of good governance. Many governance failures arise precisely in situations where one institution makes decisions, another provides funding, and a third bears political responsibility before citizens.

Such arrangements often produce a lack of transparency, diffuse accountability, and inter-institutional conflicts. By contrast, institutional congruence has the potential to strengthen transparency, improve efficiency, and enhance democratic accountability. Citizens are better able to evaluate public performance when responsibilities are clearly assigned to specific institutions.

The significance of this principle is also recognized in broader academic literature. Pollitt (2005) argues that successful public-sector reforms require a coherent relationship between authority, responsibility, and available resources. Similarly, decentralization literature emphasizes that the effectiveness of subnational governments depends not only on the formal transfer of competences but also on the allocation of adequate fiscal and administrative capacities.

Nevertheless, a competence audit alone cannot resolve systemic problems. Its effectiveness depends on whether its findings are subsequently translated into legislative and financial reforms. In the Slovak context, there is a recurring risk that analytical studies and expert

recommendations remain confined to policy documents without being implemented in practice.

For this reason, the competence audit would need to be accompanied by a binding reform timetable and a clear implementation strategy. Otherwise, it could become merely another analytical exercise with limited practical consequences.

Ultimately, the debate on competences is not simply a technical discussion about administrative arrangements. It concerns the broader question of which level of government is best equipped to provide specific public services and how responsibilities should be distributed within a multi-level system of governance. In this respect, the competence audit represents a crucial prerequisite for any meaningful reform of public administration.

5. Financing: Stability, Diversification, and Own-Source Revenues

Financing represents the most sensitive area of the proposed reform. According to SK8 and ZMOS, the current system does not adequately correspond to the scope of responsibilities performed by territorial self-government. Municipalities and self-governing regions remain financially vulnerable because they are heavily dependent on shared revenues from personal income tax and on decisions made by the central government.

The document proposes expanding the system of shared taxes so that municipalities and self-governing regions would receive a share not only of personal income tax (PIT) revenues but also of corporate income tax (CIT) and value-added tax (VAT) revenues. The objective of this proposal is to increase revenue stability and reduce dependence on a single tax source. The authors further advocate revising the allocation formulas in order to better reflect the scope of competences and differences in the fiscal capacity of individual territories.

From an analytical perspective, revenue diversification appears to be a rational approach. When local governments rely predominantly on a single tax source, their revenues become vulnerable to legislative changes and economic fluctuations. Access to multiple revenue streams can enhance fiscal stability and improve long-term planning capacities. At the same time, however, such a reform would directly affect state budget revenues and would therefore be politically difficult to implement.

SK8 and ZMOS also support a more active use of property taxation. This proposal is frequently regarded by experts as a rational instrument because property taxes are territorially based and can strengthen the fiscal autonomy of local governments. On the other hand, property taxation is politically sensitive because any increase in tax rates is directly felt by residents and property owners.

Particularly significant is the proposal to provide self-governing regions with their own tax revenues. The document argues that regions should possess at least one tax instrument over which they would have some degree of discretion, whether through the adjustment of tax rates, tax bases, or exemptions. This proposal logically follows from the broader objective of strengthening regional self-government. Without independent revenue sources, regions remain financially dependent on the state, which inevitably limits their autonomy.

The document further emphasizes that the new financing system should enable self-governments not only to maintain existing services but also to promote territorial

development. According to the authors, self-government should not function merely as a “maintenance provider” but as an active actor in meaningful territorial development (SK8 & ZMOS, 2026, p. 7). This statement illustrates that financing reform is not viewed solely as a matter of budgetary stability but also as a prerequisite for long-term regional development. From the perspective of fiscal decentralization theory, the proposal reflects a widely accepted principle: the level of government responsible for delivering public services should possess adequate fiscal resources to support those responsibilities. Without such a connection, decentralization risks becoming merely a transfer of obligations without the means necessary to fulfill them effectively.

6. Opportunities and Limitations of the Proposed Public Administration Reform

When evaluating the document, it is essential to distinguish between the professional rationale of the proposals and their political feasibility. Many of the recommendations put forward by SK8 and ZMOS are professionally defensible. Competence audits, more stable financing arrangements, mandatory consultations, and inter-municipal cooperation all address genuine shortcomings of the current public administration system.

As Pollitt (2005) argues, public-sector reforms are most likely to succeed when they are based on a clear allocation of responsibilities and a close linkage between decision-making authority and available resources. In this respect, many of the proposals contained in the document are consistent with internationally recognized principles of good governance.

The greatest political obstacles, however, are likely to arise in relation to measures that reduce the power of the central state. A constitutional act on territorial self-government, a suspensive veto, a limited legislative initiative for self-government associations, the transfer of competences from the state to regional governments, and changes to the tax system would all entail a substantial redistribution of power. The state would be required to relinquish part of its control over decision-making processes, financial resources, and administrative structures. This challenge is not unique to Slovakia. Hooghe and Marks (2003) note that decentralization reforms frequently encounter resistance from central institutions because they alter existing distributions of political authority and public resources across different levels of governance. Consequently, the implementation of decentralization is not merely a technical matter but also a political process involving competing institutional interests.

Another challenge concerns the uneven capacities of territorial self-governments themselves. Not all municipalities and regions are equally prepared to assume a broader range of responsibilities. For this reason, any reform would need to be implemented gradually and supported by transitional arrangements, methodological guidance, investments in professional expertise, and the digitalization of administrative processes.

This issue is also highlighted in OECD analyses of decentralization, which emphasize that the success of decentralization reforms depends not only on the transfer of competences but also on the administrative and fiscal capacities of subnational governments (OECD, 2019). Without sufficient institutional capacity, decentralization may lead to inequalities in service provision and weaken the overall effectiveness of public administration.

An additional risk is that the reform could be perceived as a conflict between the state and territorial self-government. Successful reform, however, cannot be based on the victory of one level of government over another. Instead, it requires agreement on which level of governance is best positioned to provide a particular public service.

In this regard, the document's emphasis on partnership is noteworthy, even though some of its proposals may appear confrontational from the perspective of central government. The broader objective is not to weaken the state but to establish a more balanced and effective system of multi-level governance.

The position paper of SK8 and ZMOS presents an ambitious vision of decentralization. Its principal contribution lies in the fact that it views public administration not merely as a collection of administrative institutions but as a system of relationships among the state, regions, municipalities, and citizens. The document correctly identifies that territorial self-government cannot function as a fully-fledged public actor without a stable legal status, clearly defined competences, and adequate financial resources.

A similar argument is advanced by Sharpe (1970), who maintains that local government can effectively fulfill its democratic and developmental functions only when it possesses a sufficient degree of autonomy, competences, and fiscal resources.

One of the major strengths of the document is its systemic approach. The proposals contained in its various sections are mutually reinforcing. Constitutional protection of self-government is intended to provide stability; inter-municipal cooperation is designed to address fragmentation; an integrated administrative model aims to reduce duplication; a competence audit seeks to establish a new distribution of responsibilities; and financing reform is intended to provide the material basis for the exercise of competences.

A weaker aspect of the document is the lack of specificity in some of its proposals. For example, it does not provide a detailed model of the suspensive veto, a concrete framework for supra-municipal structures, a comprehensive design of the proposed tax mix, or a timetable for the transfer of competences. However, this limitation can partly be explained by the nature of the document itself. It is a position paper rather than a legislative proposal.

From an academic perspective, the document can be regarded as an important contribution to the debate on public administration reform in Slovakia. Its ultimate significance, however, will depend on whether its general principles can be transformed into concrete legal, financial, and organizational solutions.

Conclusion

SK8 and ZMOS propose a model of public administration reform based on strengthening territorial self-government, continuing the process of decentralization, and establishing a more stable partnership with the state. Their proposals include constitutional protection for self-government, mandatory inter-municipal cooperation, the strengthening of regional governments, the rationalization of state administration, a comprehensive competence audit, and a new model of public financing.

From an analytical perspective, these reforms have the potential to increase transparency, efficiency, and democratic accountability within public administration. At the same time, they

are politically demanding because they would require the transfer of a portion of power, competences, and financial resources from the state to territorial self-government.

The most important contribution of the document lies in its emphasis on the principle that responsibility, decision-making authority, and financing must be interconnected. For public administration to function effectively, citizens must be able to identify who is responsible for a particular public service, while the responsible institution must possess the tools necessary to deliver that service.

In this respect, the position paper of SK8 and ZMOS represents a significant contribution to the ongoing debate on the future development of public administration in Slovakia.

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