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For the Game, for the Loyal Partisans: Distribution of Sport Grants in Slovakia

ABSTRACT: *Distribution of resources is at the core of politics. Although this activity is primarily economic in nature, the existing research shows that political representatives often use the allocation of public money to reward their allies at the expense of their rivals. This paper analyses a 2015 governmental programme of local sport grants in Slovakia that aimed to build sport facilities for children and young people. In order to avoid any political bias, the programme was established as a neutral mechanism with an anonymous evaluation of grant requests. The results of analysis, however, provide substantial evidence that the subsidies were given primarily to towns with closer political ties to the government while municipalities led by mayors from the opposition were nearly fully ignored. In addition, the presented social and economic aims of the funding programme were not effectively pursued. The paper thus represents a valuable contribution to the discussion of distributive politics, in general, as it shows that, despite the respective legal framework, the allocation of resources may still end up as a process fuelled by partisan interests.*

INTRODUCTION

The official motto of the world football federation, FIFA, states 'For the Game. For the World'. This theme, among others, carries the open message to spread football to the masses, crossing borders between countries, nations and various segments of the society. However, sport does not always follow such inclusive logic and, just as in any other area, it may be broken down into particular interests, most notably when it becomes a part of political intrigue.

This paper analyses a sport grants programme funded by the national government of Slovakia in 2015. The funding programme was created in order to provide financial support to municipalities to assist them in building multi-functional sport facilities for children and young people. Together 95 municipalities received subsidies worth a total of €3.8 million. Despite the formal rules of the programme, which strictly define the allocation of grants as anonymous, this paper shows that the reality was otherwise. According to its results, the distribution of sport grants was strongly biased, as it primarily supported municipalities with closer links to the government while towns with local leadership from the opposition were almost entirely ignored.

The article is organised as follows: First, it discusses the theoretical background of distributive politics and its intricacies. The second part describes the main points of the governmental sport grants programme in Slovakia. Following this, the data and methods are presented. Next, the paper shows the results of the analysis and the final part is devoted to discussion and conclusions.

THEORY OF PORK BARREL POLITICS

Allocation of resources is one of the central elements of politics. When elected political representatives are unable to provide enough funding to all regions in their countries, they have to decide where to provide funds and where to reduce or cut expenses. By definition, distributive policies are those that promote projects that would concentrate benefits to specific geographic locations while

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the costs are spread to all regions, typically through taxation (cf. Shepsle & Weingast 1981, Del Rossi 1995). In literature, such actions are often labeled as pork barrel politics. The term itself is mainly understood as a less effective way of distributing the resources with considerable political consequences (cf. Ames 1995, Schwartz 1994).

In his analysis of transport investments in New Zealand, Hoare (1992) provided a useful classification of pork barrel politics. According to him, the political context and specific power constellations inside countries create conditions that favour the emergence and sustainability of certain models of pork barrel politics, e.g. individual and centralised. In the former, individual elected representatives both in power and opposition use their influence to direct public investments to their own constituencies, thus increasing their prospects for re-election. This is the case in the United States where ad hoc coalitions of members of Congress from both parties are made in order to pursue specific legislative agendas (cf. Evans 2004). An alternative behaviour occurs in countries with more disciplined political parties that possess more power than individual politicians, as is the case in most European states. Under such conditions, a centralised pork barrel tends to appear. Here, the distribution is fully under the control of the parties in government, which allocate resources to districts where their candidates have enjoyed a clear victory or where their electoral prospects are unsure. Hence, the effects of the individual and centralised models of pork barrel politics differ crucially. In the individual model, the benefits of distribution are personalised and thus cross party lines, while in the centralised model, the rewards are primarily limited only to governmental parties and districts where their members are in charge. This article will concentrate on centralised pork barrel.

An important aspect of distributive politics is bound to the motivations that prompt the government (or any other central body) to allocate resources to areas led by representatives from its own ranks. According to literature, there are various motives that may be at play. First, governments may aim to direct projects to their constituencies simply in order to reward them for their behaviour in the previously held elections. Second, and similar to Hoare (1992), the motivation to support districts led by representatives from governmental parties might be aimed at an increase of their chances for re-election. As existing research shows, these vote-buying mechanisms work better for incumbents if such effects are highly visible to the electorate (cf. Veiga & Veiga 2013, Stein & Bickers 1994, Milligan & Smart 2005). Finally, the central body may provide resources to some areas to ensure their cooperation on a certain political agenda (Bullock & Hood 2005).

All of the mentioned tactics of pork barrel politics have a common pre-condition. If the actual decision making is strictly defined by some economic formula, the opportunities for an allocation of grants based on partisan ties are reduced or even eliminated (cf. Boex & Martinez 2005). As such, for politically motivated pork barrel politics, the decisions on allocation have to be at least partly discretionary, i.e. the bodies responsible for public spending are allowed to make the final decisions according to their own will.

The distribution of resources is typically a top-down process in which a central body allocates money to subjects located at the regional or local level. Hence, a relevant issue is the identity of the actors who take credit for obtaining the grants. Consider a new road or a hospital built in a town. Despite the project being paid for by an inter-governmental grant, the local authorities are the first in line to take credit for this improvement. As the literature suggests, those actors who occupy legislative positions as individuals (such as mayors) are advantaged here as they operate as single units and do not share their successes and failures with anyone. On the contrary, collective bodies (such as assemblies) often consist of representatives of multiple parties, blurring their results among members of various political affiliations (cf. Ansolabehere & Snyder 2006). Consequently, a straight political background of mayors (unlike the ones of assemblies) may be more easily used as an indicator of the political closeness of local areas to the government.

The existing research provides enough evidence of the regular usage of pork barrel politics in many countries. Milligan and Smart (2005) studied the distribution of regional development grants in Canada in the 1988–2001 period. They analysed two funding programmes aimed at assisting provinces with their economic development and found that more resources were targeted at districts represented by members of the government party. Similar outcomes were provided by Costa-I-Font, Rodriguez-Oreggia and Lunapla (2003) who focused on the allocation of resources in Mexico. According to their study, the central government provided more public spending to regions where the ruling party fared better in elections.

In his paper, Khemani (2003) compared two models of federal public spending in India, one controlled by the central government and the other by an independent agency with constitutional authority. Both funding programmes funnelled resources from the federal to the state level, however in strikingly different manners. As Khemani found, states with a close political affiliation with the central government received significantly higher amounts of grants from the federal body. On the contrary, the funding programme controlled by the independent agency did not follow this line, and it even worked as some kind of compensation, as it was actually less favourable to states with leaderships closer to the federal government. Hence, this study markedly shows the importance of studying the partisan background of the actors included in distributive politics and their mutual links. Outcomes from more empirical studies

dealing with pork barrel politics from both European and non-European countries only support this claim (cf. Veiga & Veiga 2013, Ames 1995, Hoare 1992, Golden & Picci 2008).

The growing body of literature shows that biased distributive politics may be found in all areas where political decision making is involved, including sport. Papers by Denemark (2000) and Gaunt (1999) both deal with Australia and its programme of local sport grants. In 1988, the Australian federal government launched a funding program in order to improve or establish sporting facilities in local areas. In doing so, the Labour government defined several groups for priority funding, i.e. single parents, young people and migrants. However, empirical analyses conducted by Denemark and Gaunt clearly showed that rather than helping these societal groups, the government directed more grants (and of higher value) to areas with incumbents from its own ranks. Citing Denemark (2000, 909), the sport grants programme was shown to be 'clearly a partisan phenomenon, disproportionately accruing to the governing party's own incumbents'. A politically influenced distribution of sport grants was also found in Ireland. Studies jointly mapping the period between 1999 and 2007 showed that districts that elected powerful ministers were awarded more resources compared to others (Considine, Crowley, Folley & O'Connor 2008, Suiter & O'Malley 2014).

Central Europe encompassing various post-transitional countries is also not an uncommon ground for research dealing with financial aspects of sport. In their paper, Pavlík and de Vries (2014) discuss sport vouchers as an alternative for sport funding instead of grants. Working with data from Czech Republic, they find that voucher system involves more actors and decision steps than allocation of grants, but it also includes important advantages. The application of vouchers thus may be one of solutions for Central European countries that are still developing their public funding mechanisms. Another important contribution can be found in paper by Pavlík and Špaček (2015) who concentrate on transparency of sport grants at a regional level in Czech Republic. They show that Czech regions provide only limited information about the distribution process, with methodology of evaluation of grant applications being one such problematic point. Such findings support the need to further concentrate on distributive politics in Central European region and this paper follows this line, as it aims to explore the allocation of local sport grants in Slovakia.

SPORT GRANTS PROGRAMMES IN SLOVAKIA

For years, sport in general lacked its own ministry in Slovakia but this has recently changed. In 2010, the Ministry of Education was officially renamed the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport. Hence, sport was brought under the purview of a single ministry, but only as one of its several fields. This changed after two years when the Social Democratic government created the Office of Governmental Representative for Youth and Sport. The new office was assigned the task of coordinating with other state offices on matters of sport. For the post of the representative, the cabinet appointed an MP from its own ranks and a former football coach, Dušan Galis.

Even before the inclusion of sport into the Ministry of Education, sport financing was conducted by several ministries and their subordinate state offices. Apart from this, some money channels were opened by the government itself, especially after 2006, with the appointment of the first cabinet led by Robert Fico. Typically, the sport grants were included into more general funding programmes, i.e. the donation programmes of the Prime Minister normally used extensively to cover specific or urgent economic or social situations. On one hand, this allowed the cabinets to distribute money in order to support the development of sport facilities in regional or local areas; however, it was done in a rather ad hoc manner. The new office of the governmental representative allowed a change in this area.

In 2015, the office launched a special funding programme ''Support of sport development' to provide financial assistance in building multi-functional sport facilities (Local sport grants programme announcement 2015). Based on the official requirements, the facilities had to allow several sports to be conducted, with football and volleyball at the minimum. Although the programme allowed the participation of various actors, it primarily focused on towns. This was reflected in the final distribution of grants, as 95 out of 100 subsidies were given to towns, with the five remaining obtained by schools.

The programme operated as follows. The distribution of grants was set as a top-down process with money flowing from the national to the regional or local level. To apply for a grant, an official request had to be filed. There were several eligible applicant types, including towns, schools, foundations and private companies. Out of these, the municipalities represented the core of the applicants. The request provided the specifications of the project and the applicant locality had to show its ability to cover at least 5

per cent of the entire cost with its own resources. The deadline for delivering requests was set in May, two months after the official announcement of the sport grants programme.

The actual decision on the grants was fully discretional. The requests were checked and evaluated by a commission consisting of the governmental representative and six other members selected by the government. According to the official rules, the evaluation was strictly anonymous as the requests were lacking any information about their applicants. The commission judged six individual criteria including relevancy of the project, its target groups and the sustainability of the budget, and rated each criterion zero to five points. Hence each request scored on a scale from zero to 30 points and the commission added its final recommendation whether a grant should be paid or not. In the end, these outcomes were sent to the head of the office of government – a bureaucratic institution organising the daily work of the cabinet – where they were fully adopted and confirmed. The decision process of sport grants was thus highly centralised and the government kept full control over its results.

Altogether 100 grants were allocated in the funding programme. Although the formal rules allowed some variability in the amount of money per subsidy, with a minimum of €30,000 and maximum of €50,000, virtually all grants were set at the equal amount of €40,000. The funding programme thus roughly distributed €4 million with the dominant portion given to municipalities, as they received 95 grants out of the 100.

To sum up, the presented funding mechanism of local sport grants in Slovakia includes several relevant features of mixed character. Its high centralisation, full discretion and strong political control by the government all belong to conditions associated with centralised pork barrel politics. On the other hand, the formal rules of the programme delineated an anonymous decision process, thus allegedly excluding any political bias. The following sections of the paper elaborate more on this and they show that the allocation of sport grants in Slovakia was influenced by political interests, leaving its proclaimed neutrality far behind.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper analyses the governmental programme of local sport grants in Slovakia. More specifically, it studies grant distribution and aims to assess whether this process – formally set as anonymous – included any political bias. According to the literature, centralised pork barrel politics primarily provide benefits to representatives of the ruling parties (cf. Hoare 1992). The previous section showed that the Slovak funding programme was under the full control of the national government. This opens a relevant question of whether the distribution of sport grants was done in a neutral way or if it was affected by partisan interests.

Although the official rules of the funding programme allowed a variety of actors to apply for the subsidies, this paper focuses only on municipalities as their political affiliation may be reliably estimated (see below). What is more, municipalities accounted for nearly 89 per cent of all grants requests and received 95 per cent of all subsidies, thus leaving all other actors behind. To estimate potential political bias in grant distribution, a binomial regression is applied, keeping municipalities as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable maps whether the towns received subsidies, in which case it has a value of one; otherwise it has a value of zero.

The independent variable takes into account the political affiliation of mayors as the most important local representatives of municipalities. The main presumption is that local leaderships with a closer political link to the government will have an advantage over the others. In Slovakia, mayors are directly elected using a first past the post system. The legal rules allow both partisans and independents to compete. Every candidate thus may be supported by a single political party, by a coalition of parties or stand as an independent. For the purposes of this paper, this opens up four categories of mayors. First, the mayors of the ruling party (Mayor GOV), i.e. those elected only with the support of the party Smer – Social Democracy (SMER-SD). Note that after the 2012 election, the national government is formed by a single party, SMER-SD, led by Prime Minister Robert Fico. The second category consists of mayors with support of one or more oppositional parties (Mayor OPP). The third type includes mayors elected with the backing of both the ruling party and formations from the opposition (Mayor MIX[1]) and the fourth and final category is the independents (Mayor IND). Before the distribution of sport grants took place, the most recent local elections were held in November 2014. Several towns that were unable to elect their mayor in this term voted again in the beginning of March 2015. Hence, from the time

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[1] The FPTP system used in mayoral elections motivates political parties to support joint nominees as only the candidate with plurality of votes obtains the seat. Under such circumstances, parties both from national government and parliamentary opposition (who are even not able to cooperate on national level) routinely form alliances and stand joint candidates for mayors.

of the announcement of the sport grants programme until the decision about its results, the political affiliation of mayors in all municipalities remained constant.

The study includes several control variables. In a biased distribution of grants, municipalities may also be rewarded and punished for their previous behaviour in areas other than just local elections (cf. Milligan & Smart 2005). The local sport grants programme was organised from the central level and thus it is relevant to control for results from national elections. More particularly, the analysis employs two variables, one containing the support of SMER-SD party in towns from the most recent parliamentary election in 2012 and the other doing the same for Robert Fico in the first round of presidential elections in 2014 where he competed.

In principle, distributive politics should aim to reduce regional disparities by directing more sources to less developed areas. To track this, a variable covering unemployment rate is used as an economic proxy for the level of economic development of municipalities (see Hazakis & Ioannidis 2014). The next control variable is the size of towns as defined by their population. Towns with lower number of inhabitants may often lack the necessary resources for larger projects and the central authorities may overcome this by assisting them with a higher priority status.

Based on the official documentation of the Slovak funding programme, the grants had to promote sport activities of children and youth. Hence it might be assumed that more subsidies would flow to localities with higher amounts of younger inhabitants. For this purpose, a control variable is applied, which contains the share of people under the age of 19 years in municipal populations. The age limit was set based on legal rules in Slovakia that count persons as adults after they reach 18 years. The final control variable deals with an ethnic issue. More specifically, it addresses the share of Hungarians in town populations. Hungarians represent the biggest ethnic minority in Slovakia with around a 10 per cent share of the country's population. Due to historical factors, post-1989 politics in Slovakia often included nationalistic clashes that brought Hungarian parties closer to Slovak right-wing formations (Petőcz 2009). The ruling SMER-SD under whose supervision the sport grants were distributed officially claims to be social democratic; however, authors add nationalism to its ideological profile (cf. Kopeček 2007, Mesežnikov 2009). It thus might be presumed that in respect to allocation of subsidies, towns with a higher share of Hungarians will be worse off than municipalities inhabited solely or dominantly by Slovaks.

To sum up this section, the paper tracks the pattern of distribution of local sport grants in Slovakia. To do so, it evaluates the links between the government and municipalities using the political affiliation of mayors. Apart from partisan issues, it controls for several areas, which might influence the final allocation of subsidies. The dataset contains 524 municipalities, which filed a request for a sport grant during the term stated by the governmental agency. The remaining towns are omitted from the analysis as the formal request was a necessary condition for obtaining a subsidy. In respect of the variables, the independent variable is split into four dummies, each containing one category of mayors based on their political affiliation. As for controls, results of SMER-SD and Robert Fico, unemployment, the share of young people and the share of Hungarians are given in per cent while the population of municipalities is expressed in thousands for a better estimation of its potential effects. Table 1 presents the descriptive data about the respective variables.

Tab. 1: Description of variables.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Dev.
Mayor GOV	0	1	0.25	0.43
Mayor MIX	0	1	0.12	0.33
Mayor IND	0	1	0.43	0.50
Mayor OPP	0	1	0.20	0.40
SMER-SD 2012	0.32	84.95	47.58	19.82
Fico 2014	0.48	85.71	33.10	16.27
Unemployment	5.07	80.79	19.51	11.49
Young people	7.03	51.14	20.22	5.47
Hungarians	0	95.14	11.85	25.88
Population	0.10	105.76	4.15	10.73

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

RESULTS

The local sport grants programme in Slovakia was launched in March 2015 and the selected participants were given two months to apply for the subsidies. Altogether 592 requests were filed, out of which 524 (88.5 per cent) were accounted for by municipalities. In accordance with the formal rules of the funding programme, the requests were the subject of evaluation provided by the commission under the leadership of the governmental representative. In the middle of July, the commission announced its recommendation to support 100 projects and the government accepted this proposal. Among the successful requests, 95 were delivered by municipalities while the remaining five came from schools.

Table 2 presents the basic outline of requests filed by municipalities, with the political affiliation of mayors taken into account. The data show clear disparities between the categories. Towns with governmental mayors filed one quarter of all requests, yet received more than one third of the grants awarded. A similar trend is observed for mayors of mixed partisan background. On the other hand, municipalities with independents filed more than 42 per cent of all requests yet were given only the same amount of grants as towns with mayors from the ruling party. By far the biggest discrepancy concerns the towns with local leadership from the opposition. These towns submitted one fifth of all applications but received only three grants. These findings are elaborated below.

Tab. 2: Structure of requests based on the affiliation of mayors.

	Unsuccessful requests ($N = 429$)	Successful requests ($N = 95$)	Total requests ($N = 524$)
Mayor GOV	97 (22.6)	34 (35.8)	131 (25.0)
Mayor MIX	40 (9.3)	24 (25.3)	64 (12.2)
Mayor IND	189 (44.1)	34 (35.8)	223 (42.6)
Mayor OPP	103 (24.0)	3 (3.2)	106 (20.2)

Note: Column percentages in parentheses.

A common method for studying political bias in the distribution of public resources is to concentrate on mean sums of allocated grants (cf. Denemark 2000). This approach is useless, however, in the case of the sport grants programme in Slovakia, as virtually all subsidies were of the same amount of €40,000. More particularly, out of 95 grants given to towns, only two grant amounts varied slightly. These awards were €39,500 and €39,800. In the previous research, mean sums of grants per capita were also used, i.e. a calculation of resources per inhabitant of municipalities receiving the money (cf. Hazakis & Ioannidis 2014). This technique is also pointless in the Slovak case due to local conditions. With the allocated grants being of the same amount their per capita effect is fully affected by the population of the municipality regardless of any political bias implemented in the decision-making process. Thus even if the government intended to transfer more money to towns with closer political links, the per capita method would not be able to capture this effort in a reliable way. This is true even if the full legal range of €30,000 to 50,000 per grant was applied in practice. Among towns that filed a request, the smallest had 103 inhabitants while the largest had more than 105,000; this gives a ratio of more than 1,000:1. However, the ratio between the possible minimum and maximum grant amounts is only 1.67:1. Hence, even the minimum grant given to the smallest town would have a tremendously higher per capita effect than the maximum allowed subsidy allocated to the biggest municipality, leaving these numbers out of any reasonable comparison. For these reasons, the per capita approach will not be used in this paper.

The best way to address the Slovak case is to concentrate on the access of towns with different political affiliation to grants expressed through the success rate of their requests. Table 3 shows these results. Clearly the highest success rate of applications is observed for both categories with mayors being supported by the ruling party. For towns with mayors backed solely by party SMER-SD, one out of four requests was successful and led to obtaining a grant. For municipalities with local leaders supported both by the governmental party and parties from the opposition, this rate is even higher. Well behind these two categories stand the independents who succeeded only in one out of six cases. Finally, an extremely low success rate is seen for towns with oppositional mayors who filed 106 requests but got only three subsidies. The differences among the four categories are thus quite dramatic (at $p < 0.001$) and they suggest that the decision-making process of the governmental commission was not free of political bias.

Tab. 3: Grants awarded to towns based on the affiliation of mayors.

	Total requests	Successful requests	Success rate in per cent
Mayor GOV	131	34 (2.7)	26.0
Mayor MIX	64	24 (4.3)	37.5
Mayor IND	223	34 (-1.5)	15.2
Mayor OPP	106	3 (-4.6)	2.8

Note: Adjusted standardised residuals are in parentheses. Towns not awarded with grants are included in the calculation but not reported in the table. Chi-Square is significant (p < 0.001).

To provide a more precise estimation, a binomial regression is applied. The dependent variable has the value of one if a town received a grant and zero if its request was unsuccessful. With respect to the political affiliation of local leadership, the mayors from the opposition serve as a reference category. All variables were tested for multi-collinearity and as expected, a strong positive association was found between results of SMER-SD party in the 2012 national election and the results of Robert Fico in the first round of the presidential race in 2014. What is more, both these variables are highly negatively associated with the share of Hungarians in towns. Based on this, three models are constructed; each model includes only one of the three correlated variables. For other variables, no multi-collinearity was found.

Tab. 4: Distribution of local sport grants.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mayor_GOV	15,195*** (,653)	15,068*** (,646)	17,230*** (,656)
Mayor_MIX	21,746*** (,666)	20,941*** (,656)	23,738*** (,666)
Mayor_IND	5,623** (,628)	5,338** (,622)	5,701** (,625)
Mayor_OPP (ref.)	..	..	..
SMER-SD 2012	..	..	,984* (,007)
Fico 2014	..	,985 (,009)	..
Hungarians	1,009 (,006)	..	..
Population	1,008 (,010)	1,005 (,010)	1,005 (,010)
Unemployment	,950** (,018)	,959* (,017)	,953** (,017)
Young people	1,007 (,035)	,992 (,034)	1,000 (,034)
Constant	,052** (,886)	,114* (,874)	,129* (,863)
Nagelkerke *R*-Square	0,173	0,174	0,180
N	524	524	524

*Standard error in parentheses. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.*

Table 4 presents the results of analysis. All three models point to a clear bias of distribution of sport grants based on partisan interests. Towns led by mayors with governmental or mixed support were tremendously advantaged over municipalities led by representatives from the opposition. With the allocation process fully under the control of the Social Democratic government, the mayors backed by SMER-SD had more than 15 times higher odds in getting a grant than their oppositional counterparts. Local leaders with mixed backing were even better off, with more than 20 times higher probability of being successful with their requests than mayors supported by parties from the opposition. Towns led by independents also enjoyed some advantage over opposition representatives, however, to a lesser extent. In sum, the results of regression analysis strongly challenge the alleged anonymous distribution of sport grants in Slovakia.

Going through the findings, it may be rather surprising that towns with mayors supported by both the governmental party and the opposition claimed even better results than municipalities backed only by the ruling party. One explanation points to the partisan identity of mayors from the mixed category, i.e. those backed both by SMER-SD and parties from the opposition. When more parties support a candidate in mayoral race, the official statistics do not distinguish between them. It is thus not possible to determine which of these parties nominated the candidate and which only provided their support in this effort. Hence, many of the mayors placed into the mixed category whose towns received a grant might be members of the ruling party but there is no data to prove it.

However, something can be done in this matter. Looking closely at the structure of the coalitions of parties forming the mixed category, two sub-groups may be identified. First are the local coalitions of SMER-SD and parties of parliamentary opposition joined occasionally by other smaller parties. Out of 64 towns with mayors belonging to the mixed category who filed a grant request, such a coalition emerged 41 times. In the remaining 23 municipalities, SMER-SD joined forces with non-parliamentary parties especially with its former junior coalition partner from the previous government, the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). The crucial difference between these two models of cooperation is in the success rate of their grant requests. The first type, with SMER-SD and parties of parliamentary opposition, succeeded in 12 cases out of 41 with a success rate of 29.3 per cent. On the contrary, of the 23 municipalities led by mayors supported by SMER-SD with SNS or other non-parliamentary parties 12 obtained grants; this means a success rate of 52.2 per cent. Although it is not known which parties nominated the mayors from their own ranks, it is probable that SMER-SD selected its fair share of candidates when cooperating with parliamentary parties. In the second model of cooperation, it is relevant to expect that even a majority of candidates came from SMER-SD as here its partners were only parties of small or even marginal importance. Providing these expectations are true, mayors representing the ruling party were not far from obtaining nearly half of all allocated grants. In light of this, the better results for the mixed category of mayors are in full accordance with the theoretical expectations of centralised pork barrel politics.

Concerning the results of Robert Fico in the presidential election, their effects were shown to be without significance. On the other hand, the results of SMER-SD in the 2012 national election are significant, however, the coefficient surprisingly contradicts the expectations. The effect itself is fairly weak though and it is completely overshadowed by the estimated influence of the political affiliation of mayors. Hence, while the governmental commission seemed to judge requests from towns based on the partisan background of the local representatives, the results of national elections were out of its scope and did not truly affect its final decision.

Regarding other control variables, the share of Hungarians and population of towns are found to have no effect on fund allocation. In case of the former, this might be due to the fact that localities with higher share of Hungarians are less likely to support SMER-SD and thus the ruling party has only low motivation to provide grants to these areas. More important, however, are the findings about young people. The official announcement of the funding programme declared its aim to support the construction of sport facilities for children and youth. Based on this, a relevant presumption is that grants would primarily flow to localities with more young people in the population. Actually the analysis shows that the variable mapping people below 19 years of age had no effect on the allocation of subsidies. Hence, municipalities with a higher share of young inhabitants received no advantage in the process despite the fact that the target group was one of six criteria that the governmental commission had to evaluate when making its final recommendation.

If the funding programme had aimed to reduce regional discrepancies, more grants should have been awarded to less developed areas. However, the results for unemployment, which was used as an economic proxy for town development, show otherwise. For every percentage point of unemployment, the odds of obtaining a subsidy decreased by about 5 per cent, based on the construction of the models. This outcome only further supports the idea that the local sport grants in Slovakia were allocated mainly based on partisan interests while the general economic and social purpose of distributive politics was ignored.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper analysed the local sport grants program in Slovakia. The programme was launched and realised during the first half of 2015 and officially aimed at assisting regional and local units in building sport facilities primarily for children and youth. A total of 100 subsidies were allocated with 95 of them directed to municipalities. Our results show that the legal setting of the programme was in sharp contrast with the final distribution of resources. More particularly, the funding programme was strongly politically biased and lacked its alleged neutrality. We found that municipalities with local leadership closer to the government were substantially advantaged while towns with mayors representing the opposition parties were almost ignored. Even towns with independent mayors ended up better off when compared to oppositional representatives. The estimates provided by the analysis thus considerably challenge the official character of the funding programme as a tool aimed at the improvement of sport facilities on a non-political basis and its proclaimed anonymous character of requests evaluation.

This paper shows some important theoretical implications for further research of the centralised allocation of public resources in general. The case of Slovakia, as well as previous research from Australia and Ireland (cf. Denemark 2000, Gaunt 1999, Considine, Crowley, Folley & O'Connor 2008, Suiter & O'Malley 2014), provides evidence that sport, as with many other areas, is not immune to becoming part of particular politically influenced interests. The study of distributive politics should thus not be confounded by the official aims and legal rules of the respective funding programmes, which often proclaim their non-political role and express the sincere interest of the state in providing assistance to a particular field, which may include sport, culture or education. Based on the results of this paper, research of distributive programs seems to be of vital importance, providing four points are present. First, the allocation of grants is realised as a top-down process, with decision making concentrated in a single central body, such as a ministry or a selected commission. Second, the decision of the respective body is fully discretional without any obligation to follow a legally set formula. Third, the whole process of distribution is realised or at least supervised by a political body in whose interest it is to pursue its own defined partisan aims. Fourth and finally, the recipients of the subsidies also have a partisan background that defines their political link to the body controlling the distribution process.

In the Slovak sport grant programme, all four points were present. The allocation of local sport grants was conducted on the national level by a commission selected by the government. The actual decision was discretionary and under the control of the national government. Finally, the recipients of the financial support were mostly municipalities whose local leadership is clearly identifiable as partisan. The result is that the proclaimed neutrality of the distribution process formally secured by anonymisation of the requests, served only as an image tool without any true effect. The local grants were awarded to towns primarily based on their political link to the government without proper attention given to the share of young people in the population of towns or to less developed areas of the country. In sum, the local sport grants programme in Slovakia turned into a fully-fledged partisan project, which rewarded local members of the ruling party at the expense of their rivals. Using the FIFA motto quoted at the beginning of this article, the Slovak funding programme kept its first part `For the Game` while changing its second part from `For the World` to 'For the loyal partisans`. The findings in this paper will need further research in this area of interest.

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