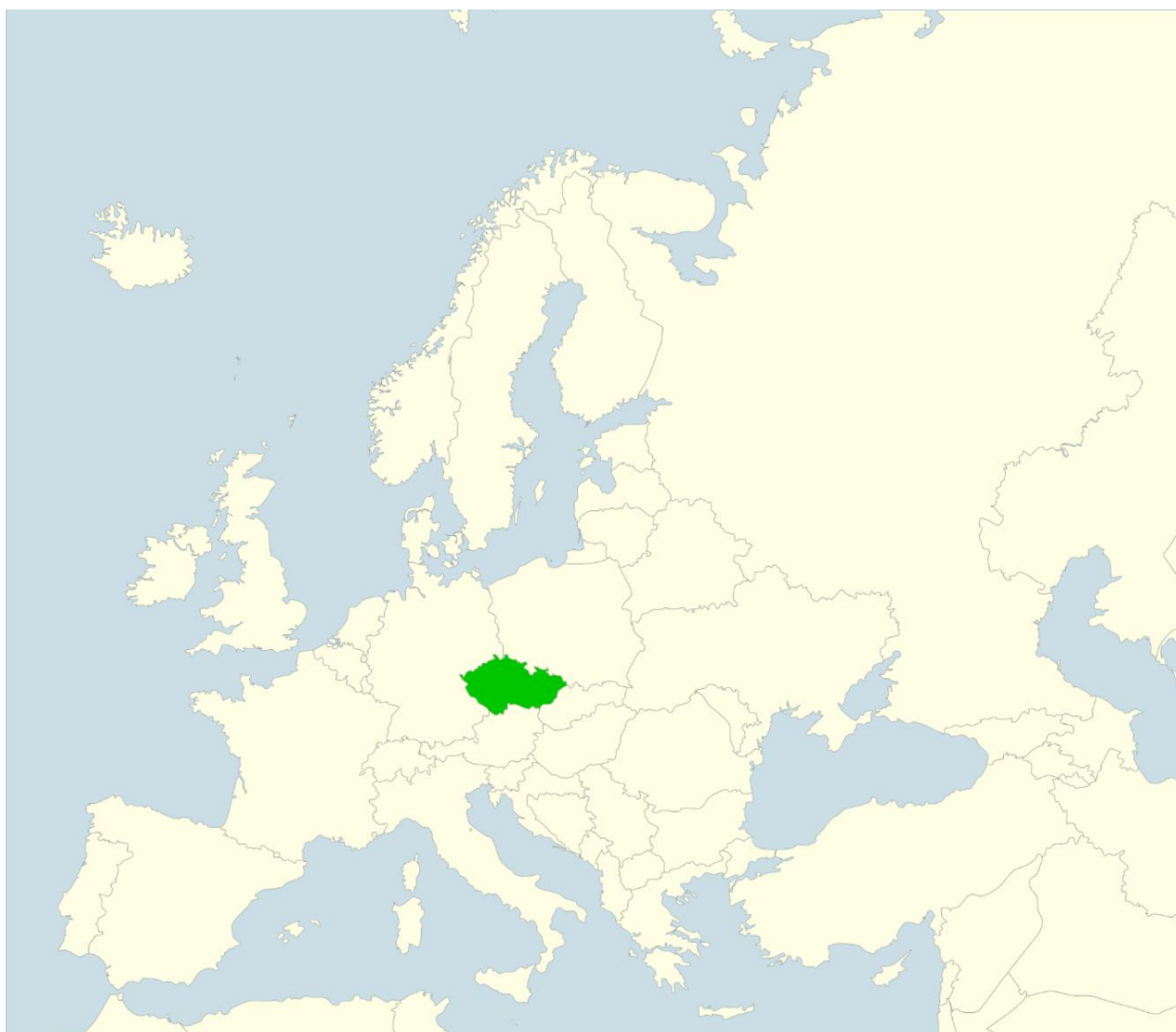


OLDER ADULTS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL AREAS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract: Older adults represent a specific group of political and civic actors. In one line of argument, the growing number of people over 65 is gaining stronger voice and representation, and plays a stronger role in social, economic and political life and changes in societies. Another approach points to the social exclusion of older adults and their “oppressed voices”. Using a representative survey of the Czech rural population age 60+, *Quality of Life of Seniors in Rural Areas* (2016), we looked at the level and forms of civic engagement of older adults and their perceptions in rural areas. We found these attitudes associated with the “locus of control” as an indicator of agency and with place attachment. Some sociodemographic characteristics (being younger, having higher education) increase the probability of older adults’ civic participation in rural areas. The results enhance our knowledge on rural social networks in later life and point to untapped potential of older adults in the local contexts.

Key words: older adults; civic engagement; rural areas; locus of control; agency; quality of life; local government

Souhrn: Starší lidé představují specifickou skupinu politických a občanských aktérů. V jednom pohledu je zvyšující se počet osob starších 65 let považován za hlavního hybatele sociálních a politických změn v demokratických společnostech, jiné argumenty naopak poukazují na sociální vyloučení starších osob a “umlčené hlasy”. S využitím reprezentativního empirického šetření venkovských respondentů 60+ v České republice “Kvalita života seniorů na venkově” (2016) analyzujeme občanské a politické zapojení seniorů v lokálním kontextu a jejich pohled na výkon lokální samosprávy ve vesnických oblastech. Zjišťujeme, že tyto postoje jsou spojeny s konceptem místa kontroly jako indikátoru aktérství a s přináležitostí k místu. Vybrané sociodemografické charakteristiky (mladší senioři, s vyšším vzděláním) pak v rurálním kontextu zvyšují pravděpodobnost občanské angažovanosti.

Klíčová slova: senioři, občanská angažovanost, venkov, lokus kontroly, ktérství, kvalita života, místní samospráva

1. Introduction

In the Czech Republic, the share of older adults is higher in both the biggest urban centres and in smaller rural areas compared to the national average (CZSO, 2014). The ageing in small rural areas (villages) can represent specific challenges in terms of policy priorities and goals, which need to reflect the preferences and needs of its inhabitants in different ages and life stages. In this paper, we look at civic engagement of older adults in rural communities. Together with Bernard et al. (2012), we believe that high levels of civic engagement in rural areas are related to higher interest to be involved in decision making on local level (Bernard et al., 2012; Barret, Brunton-Smith, 2014) and can serve as an important resource of active ageing pursuits in later life (Skinner et al. 2016; Martinson, Minkler, 2006).

Civic engagement among older adults is an important element of the currently dominant concept of active ageing (WHO, 2002), and is supported as such by the European Union (EU) and the governments of its individual countries. To find out how Czech rural municipalities are ready to engage growing ageing populations, we focused on the following questions: To what extent are Czech older adults (here defined as 60+), in their own view, involved in the local political structure in rural areas? Do they have, and do they take up opportunities to become involved, to be heard, and also to apply their civic rights and interests? Are there any identifiable characteristics that increase or decrease the probability of being involved and exercise the agency? And finally, how satisfied are older rural dwellers with local government and

opportunities to participate, and how is participation itself connected to the subjective quality of life in old age?

In the first part of the text, we discuss levels of civic engagement in later life and the influence of age on civic engagement. We use the example of voting behaviour to illustrate some of the historical and life course dynamics connected with this issue, and we draw parallels for our own empirical interest. These are then illustrated by results from a representative survey of the older rural population. In the following discussion, we underpin the cumulative dis/advantages of later life political and civic engagement in a rural context and point to limitations identified in our study.

2. Theoretical background

Civic engagement

The notion of civic engagement can be understood as a broader concept including political, social, and moral involvement (Berger, 2009). In Berger's (2009) view, social engagement is understood as a part of civic engagement, which is not necessarily related to political activity. However, social engagement may also be combined with political engagement or can serve as a resource that fosters or facilitates a political type of engagement (ibid). For the purposes of the article, we define 'engagement' as "having an interest in, paying attention to, or having knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes or feelings about either political or civic matters, whereas 'participation' is defined in terms of political and civic participatory behaviours" (Barrett, Brunton-Smith, 2014, p. 5). Along with Verba, Nie, and Kim (1987), we define political participation as 'more or less direct legal activity by private persons aimed at influencing the selection of government officials and/or their activities'.

On the local level, civic engagement can have various forms, such as membership in local organizations, involvement in programmes organised by the municipality, or direct (political) involvement in municipal policy making and management. According to Barret and Brunton-Smith's (2014) overview, forms of civic participation can include also informal assistance to the well-being of others in the community, community problem-solving through community organisations/membership of community organisations, membership of other non-political organisations (e.g. religious institutions, sports clubs, etc.) / attending meetings of these organisations and here expressing one's point, etc. Preferred, prevalent, and/or available forms of civic engagement are culture-specific and mutable over time. Many forms of political activity regarded as unconventional in the past, – for example, signing a petition or displaying bumper stickers, etc. – have now become more mainstream (Norris, 1999), more accessible and inclusive as a result. However, specific forms of participation and engagement may still depend on social class or a particular subculture (Vlachová & Lebeda, 2006), as well as on gender and age. All forms of participation presume a certain level of available information and also a high level of identification with the municipality and/or place attachment (Bernard et al., 2012). To what extent this applies to older residents of rural areas in the Czech Republic will be a question for our empirical study below.

Civic engagement among older adults

With respect to relations between demographic ageing and civic engagement in general, and politics, there are two partially conflicting approaches found in the literature. The first deals with so-called "grey power" (Durandal, 2003; Davidson, 2005) and is based on the demographic argument that a rising number and proportion of older adults in the population means an increasing influence on the politics and public issues has risen in the contexts of individual countries and local communities (cf. Skinner & Hanlon, 2016), and will be leading to a risk of generational conflict. In contrast, the second approach points out that older adults are subject to social exclusion and systematic discrimination which is also manifested in the civic and political sphere (Walsh, Scharf, Keating, 2017). While pointing to the growing size of ageing population, the social exclusion paradigm states that older adults are under-represented in public life and that their voices are unheeded – and this is especially the case of rural contexts (Warburton, Scharf & Walsh, 2016; Postle, Wright & Beresford, 2005). In both approaches, we can make

the assumption that “older adults” as a group are rather homogenous with respect to social, economic, education, class, age, and gender characteristics. In reality, as Rozanova, Keating, and Egel (2012) put it: “Five factors make choices for social engagement in later life unequal among older adults who differ by gender, class, age and health status. Profound engagement in care work, compulsory altruism, personal resources, objectively perceived and subjectively available engagement opportunities and ageist barriers around paid work constrain choices for seniors who lack privilege in the context of a market economy, particularly for older women on a low-income.” (Rozanova, Keating, & Eales, 2012, p. 1). The risks tend to accumulate with age (Dannefer, 2003). On top of these aspects, a rural place of residence is considered a vehicle for increasing and storing inequality, including its intergenerational transmission (Shucksmith, 2012). The risk of being excluded from possibility to exercise one’s civic rights and defend his or her interests is therefore not randomly distributed.

The dynamic of civic engagement: the example of voting

Older adults tend to be more interested in public affairs and on average are more likely to vote (Petrová Kafková, 2013; Rabušic & Hamanová, 1999). The obvious reasons for higher participation among older citizens could be the fact that they have become habituated to voting over their lifetime and feel a stronger subjective norm to vote (Goerres, 2009). For example, in the Czech Republic, the execution of voting right of older or disabled people is encouraged as they are visited in their homes with the ballot boxes or visited in their social or health institutions (Linek & Lyons, 2007), and it would seem these institutional factors have had a positive effect on participation. At the same time, as Goerres (2009) continues, there are factors which could hinder or decrease their voting participation; these are primarily the fact that older citizens (a) tend to lack a mobilising partner; (b) tend to suffer from worse health; and (c) are, as a member of an older cohort, generally less well-educated, although life experience replaces the function of formal education over a lifetime.

In general, an aging population (a rising share of older adults within the population) and an increase in the share of people with higher (tertiary) education should contribute to an increase in political involvement; however, voter turnout has steadily declined since the 1990s despite these trends, similarly to the US in the 70s and later to Western Europe (Linek, 2013). Linek (2013) analysed generational effects in voter turnout in the Czech Republic during the years 1990-2010 and argues that the effect of generational replacement on turnout decline in the Czech Republic has been weak, while social inequalities in electoral participation have grown and educational and class inequalities in turnout have increased. There is evidence of an association between electoral participation and/or the party elected and the socio-economic status of the voters, especially their education, social class and age (Linek, 2011; Linek & Lyons, 2007; Smith & Matějů, 2011). However, these factors could be prioritised; for example, social class seems to be a stronger predictor than chronological age. Furthermore, there is higher turnout in both parliamentary and community elections in smaller communities (smaller cities and villages). Traditionally, the highest voter turnout in parliamentary elections is in the smallest municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants (never below 70%), progressively decreasing with the increasing size of the municipality (CZSO, 2007). Beside the size of the municipality (cf. Majetić, Rajter, & Dević, 2017), its geographical location matters too, especially in local/communal elections. For example, there is lower participation in elections in municipalities with higher migration rates (such as municipalities close to the borders with Germany and Poland newly resettled after 1945 or in the outer ring around the capital city of Prague). According to Bernard and colleagues (Bernard et al., 2012), this may reflect lower levels of local patriotism and local identity, as well as lower place attachment in general. We hypothesise that similar aspects, i.e. education, local identity and place attachment will have influence not only over voting behaviour, but over the civic engagement of older rural adults in general.

3. Methodology and data

The data for the research was provided by the project “Rural Ageing: unanswered question(s) in environmental gerontology” (GAČR 16-20873S). The data consists of a representative sample of the older rural population in the Czech Republic and was collected by the CAPI method (Computer

Assisted Personal Interviews) by the subcontracted agency. In total, we obtained 1,235 completed questionnaires from face-to-face interviews with people aged 60 years and above in rural populations. Only the non-institutionalised population was involved. The representative sample was selected using quotas for age, sex, education, region (NUT3) and rurality type and was weighted. For the analysis, the IBM SPSS (ver. 24) software was used. We employed one-dimensional and two-dimensional analysis to describe the relationships between variables representing operationalised concepts of civic engagement, informedness, local attachment, rurality, and happiness and loneliness.

The rurality type was defined by the work of Petr (2015), who proposed his typology based on five composite indicators: share of occupied flats in family houses on all occupied flats; density of inhabitants in built-up areas; share of employment in typical urban employment sectors (e.g. ICT); share of jobs per one economically active person; and number of selected amenities in the municipality (e.g. schools, health care providers, post office, etc.). In our research, we followed only small towns and rural municipalities: 1) towns with under 5,000 inhabitants (5% of our sample); 2) transitional municipalities with significant urban features (11%); 3) other transitional municipalities (15%); 4) category I municipalities (rural municipalities – 45%); 5) category II municipalities (significantly rural municipalities – 22%) and 6) category III municipalities (extremely rural municipalities – 1%). Although, according to Petr (2015), these six types of settlements represent more than 95% of all Czech municipalities, only 38% of inhabitants live there. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, together with some basic information on economic activity, health status, and education are given in Table 1.

Tab 1. Descriptive summary of respondents' characteristics (in %).

Male	44
Female	56
Age:	
60 – 69	55
70 – 79	29
80+	16
Education:	
Primary	35
Secondary without graduation certificate (“maturita”)	41
Secondary with certificate	19
Higher	5
Objective place attachment:	
Born in the municipality	62
Moved in	38
- moved in after 1989	30
- moved in after 2010	6
Living in the area for 12 months of the year	96
Additional characteristics:	
Having a partner	66
Working for pay	23
Using a walking aid	26

Overall, the sample consists of long-term residents living in the researched areas. Most of them were already retired, but in relatively good health⁴ and for the most part also living in a partnership; 12% lived in households with three or more members.

⁴ Using a walking aid is associated with bad subjective health (Pearson $r = -0.283$, $p < 0.001$) and higher subjective age ($r = -0.305$, $p < 0,001$).

Civic engagement was measured in four ways. Active political participation was recorded in answers to two questions: “Have you ever run for political office in local/municipal elections?” and “Do you hold any management position in your local community (e.g. member of a board, local government, ...?)”. Active civic participation was then measured using the question: “Are you a member of any association in your municipality (e.g. firefighters; hunters; gardeners...)?”⁵ As Table 2 below shows, this particular indicator is sensitive to the smaller number of structural opportunities in smaller and more rural municipalities, where as a result involvement is considerably lower. Finally, as being informed is regarded as a key indicator of involvement, we also followed various ways of obtaining locally relevant information or a lack of interest in these with the question: “In which ways do you keep yourself informed about local issues?” Several variants were then offered as answers, including “I don’t follow them, I’m not interested” (see Table 3 below for greater details).

Tab 2. Share of respondents in civic engagement by rurality type (column %).

	Towns under 5,000 inhabitants	Transitional municipalities with significant urban features	Other transitional municipalities	Rural municipalities category I.	Rural municipalities category II.	Extremely rural category III.	Total
Ever run for office	8	8	7	9	4	7	8
Having political office	2	1	1	3	2	0	2
Being part of a volunteer group	20	14	19	19	17	7	18

As our study is based on cross-sectional data, we are unable to predict causality. On the basis of a literature study in the areas of ageing studies, quality of life studies, and civic engagement studies, we decided to follow basic sociodemographic characteristics, the locus of control, and place attachment as independent variables.

The locus of control (Lachman, 1986; Oswald, Wahl, Schilling, & Iwarsson, 2007) was defined as the belief about who or what probably had the biggest influence over the respondent’s life. Accordingly, 49% of respondents cited “people around me” (external locus of control); 29% cited “me, myself” (internal locus of control); and 22% cited “God” (10%) and “luck” (12%) (transcendental locus of control).⁶ This measure is generally used in the context of place and space-based studies in order to determine the level of agency, a concept combining the outcomes of opportunities taken and obstacles overcome at both the psychological and social level. In our study here, we find it important as it may influence the will to participate, possibly at least in partially overriding minority characteristics.

Place attachment is usually understood as a multidimensional concept (Burholt, 2012) encompassing physical, social or cultural, psychological or personal and temporal components. Burholt (2006), for example, identified six types of place attachment: general locational satisfaction; historical perspective; aesthetic and emotional components of location; social support; social integration; and appropriateness of the environment. In our study, place attachment was measured in two ways. The first indicator was related more to physical space and dependent on the dominant lifestyle and related activities and reflecting the appropriateness of the environment in Burholt’s (2012) terms. This was measured by the question on geographical

⁵ In Czech: Kandidovala/a jste někdy do zastupitelstva Vaší obce v obecních/městských volbách? Jste členem nějakého sdružení ve Vaší obci (např. dobrovolní hasiči, myslivci, zahrádkáři apod.)? Zastáváte nějakou funkci v řízení Vaší obce (např. jako člen komise, zastupitelstva...?). Několik následujících otázek se věnuje Vašemu zapojení do dění obce. Jakou formou se zajímáte o dění v místě Vašeho bydliště, ve Vaší obci? (Varianty odpovědí: sleduji obecní zpravodaj, hlášení obecního rozhlasu, vývěsky apod.; sleduji informace v denním tisku, televizi, rádiu; informace na internetu; bavíme se o tom se sousedy, známými, přáteli, rodinou; navštěvuji jednání obecní rady; nesleduji, nezajímá mne to.)

⁶ Other categories are treated here as missing (don’t know; combination of different sources...).

scope of action in *typical* day when outside the home: 50% stayed in the relative vicinity of their home, not going anywhere far; 14% went relatively far away from the neighbourhood, and 36% remained in the vicinity of their home or travelled an unspecified distance according to the demands of the particular day. These results support the idea of a shrinking geographical locus with increasing age, as those in their sixties were less tied to a place with their daily activities (37%), than those in their seventies (58%) and especially those in their eighties (84%). Women tended to be less mobile than men, which could be partially due to the earlier retirement age for women in the Czech Republic, as well as to the lower proportion of women among both drivers-licence holders and active drivers.⁷

The other measure of place attachment was more socio-psychological in character, the question relating to feelings of belonging vs. the feeling of being alienated from the neighbourhood, i.e., “not really recognising it anymore”, reflecting also the general locational satisfaction. This was measured on a 5-point scale, with 87% feeling still (very) much at home, 10% choosing the midpoint, and only 3% of interviewees feeling (really) alienated from their living environment. It is important to note that these two measures are not statistically associated (Spearman’s rho = 0.006). The feeling of belonging is increasing with the willingness to stay put or to move, i.e., detachment from the place (Spearman’s rho = 0.271; p. < 0.001). And while the first measure is not dependent on rurality, the socio-psychological measure of attachment to place slightly decreases with decreasing rurality (Gamma = -0.176; p. < 0.001) i.e., the situation of feeling at home is stronger in smaller and more rural municipalities. Some association can also be found here between alienation from place and the feeling of loneliness (Spearman’s rho = 0.278; p. < 0.001), underlining both the psychological and social aspects of this indicator.

To enhance the quality of life debate, we also tested the association between political and civic participation in rural areas and older residents’ perceived quality of life. Subjective quality of life was followed by two proxies – subjective happiness and feelings of loneliness (*Taking everything into account, how happy are you?/ Do you ever feel lonely?* – answers measured on a scale from 1 to 10; 1 = very happy, 10 = not at all happy; 1 = always feel lonely, 10 = never feel lonely). The average value of happiness was 4.2 (± 1.89, median 4.0). The average value of loneliness was 4.14 (± 2.53, median 4.0). Both variables are strongly associated (Pearson r = 0.533, p. < 0.001), although still represents different dimensions of quality of life ‘Happiness’ is understood as part of the quality of life concepts equalised with subjective enjoyment of life and defined as the overall appreciation of one’s life-as-a-whole (Veenhoven, 2001). Loneliness as feeling of being lonely has been repeatedly identified as a unique risk factor of health decline and increased mortality (Perissinotto, Stijacic Cenzer, Covinsky, 2012) with direct implication for quality of life of older adults (Kitzmüller et al., 2018), especially in very old age and rural contexts (Dugan, Kivett, 1994).

We will now examine whether and how the abovementioned features influence various types of civic engagement in any particular way; that is, whether there are any specific issues related to later life civic engagement which would either point in the direction of increasing “grey voices” in rural areas or display some instances of social exclusion.

4. Results

Being and staying informed about local issues

The feeling of being well informed on what is going on in the local area, were quite high in our sample of older adults living in rural areas. Only 14% (n=167) of respondents explicitly claimed that they didn’t follow what was happening in their small town or village, while the majority used various means of getting acquainted with information on local issues.

The most prevalent source of information on local happenings was interpersonal relationships. Discussing local issues with **neighbours and acquaintances** was the main source of local information for 56% of interviewees, while the same percentage of respondents followed local media such as municipal newsletters or public-address systems, or other means of

⁷ Cramer’s V coefficient = 0,281 (driver’s licence holders), 0,293 (frequency of car drivers), both significant p. < 0.001.

communication provided by the local authority (56%). As one would expect, mass media (television, radio, newspapers) were slightly less prevalent in providing local information (42%), as was the Internet (14%). However, only 4% attended municipal council / municipal board meetings to obtain information “first hand”, with increased participation in smaller rural municipalities as opposed to more urban-like areas (Table 3).

Tab 3. Modes of acquiring local information by the rurality type (in %).

	% in total	Towns under 5,000 inhabitants (5%)	Transitional municipalities with significant urban features (11%)	Other transitional municipalities (15%)	Rural municipalities category I. (45%)	Rural municipalities category II. (22%)	Extremely rural (1%)
Discussions with friends, family, neighbours	56.3	63.3	51.1	55.6	55.2	60.8	46.1
Local media	55.7	51.8	42.6	59.0	56.6	60.2	43.4
Mass media	41.5	32.7	34.9	39.0	42.3	48.3	22.7
Internet	13.7	10.7	19.5	19.0	11.5	13.0	2.5
Attending municipal meetings	3.7	2.4	4.7	2.7	4.2	3.3	0
Not interested, not searching for information	13.5	13.4	17.8	15.8	13.1	10.0	22.1

Although they are in a relative minority, it is interesting to look more closely at those who claim *not to be* interested in local affairs, or, more precisely, not to be using these various information channels as a basic means of being or staying involved or engaged. While, as stated above, this group represents on average only 14% of the whole sample, this share increases slightly from 12% among aged 60–69 to 19% among those aged 80 years and over. On the other hand, this share steadily decreases with **increasing level of education** – from 16% among older adults with elementary education, to only 7% among those with a university degree. Internal locus of control (18%), as opposed to external locus of control (10%) indicating stronger agency, is also a feature of those who claim to be rather interested in local issues. However, the greatest divide is between those who have a strong sense of attachment to a place and **feel “really at home”** and those who feel alienated from the place (12% vs. 49%).

For older rural dwellers, the main source of information is interpersonal relationships and local media; thus, it is no surprise that the lowest proportions of “non-informed” people are those in marriage. Being partnered decreases the risk of lacking local information by six percentage points (12% vs. 18%). Men and women don’t differ in this measure. With respect to losing interest in local information, divorce (20%) rather than widowhood (16%) seems to be the risk, though the differences are too small for any decisive conclusion.

Finally, older adults who *do* follow local information are involved in voluntary activities and social clubs far more often (20% vs. 3%) and exhibit a higher inclination to try to run for political office in local government (9% vs. 1%). Our cross-sectional data does not allow us to determine the direction of this relationship, but it could be a **mutually reinforcing cycle of wanting to make a change because one is informed and being informed about further issues while being in a position of power**. In the next section of the paper, we will look more closely at some of the features of older adults’ involvement in civic activities and political engagement in rural areas.

Involvement in local policy making and other forms of civic engagement

In general, 18% of the older adults in our sample were involved in some form of local voluntary organisation, such as those related to fire-fighting, hunting, and gardening etc.; but engagement in political affairs was much lower: only 8% had ever run for political office in local government and only 2% (n=23) had ever had a political function in local government (see Table 2 above). In many cases, these two types of civic engagement, i.e., voluntary work and political involvement, may be closely related, as in smaller areas with denser social networks much of the decision making can involve informal meetings and negotiations at the village hall or local playing field. Policy-making can be carried out simultaneously or in mutual interdependence with more or less formal voluntary activities. As previously shown by Choi (2003), being personally invited by someone to take part in civic activities increases the odds of people becoming engaged; therefore, meeting people in social gatherings (i.e., having the chance of meeting a mobilising partner) may increase the odds of becoming politically active as well. The statistical analysis indeed supports this hypothesis. Although the association between having a function in local government and being a part of a voluntary organisation is not especially strong (contingency coefficient (cc) = 0.244; p. < 0.001), it applies for all educational groups, rurality types, age groups and partnering statuses, as well as for both sexes. In addition, these association measures do become somewhat stronger for younger respondents, those with secondary and university education, women, and those working for pay, and for the biggest and second smallest municipalities in our sample (types 1 and 5)⁸.

The statistical association is even stronger for membership of voluntary organisations and for even being a candidate for local political representation (cc = 0.347; p. < 0.001). Here, the profile of the connection differs slightly, as the association between indicators of voluntary engagement and political office is stronger for the oldest group (80+), respondents without a partner, the two biggest types of municipalities (types 1 & 2), and again for both the lowest and highest educational groups and also for those working for pay (cc = 0.430; 0.420; 0.361; 0.447; 0.517; 0.551; 0.420; 0.387; all p. < 0.001). The relationship with economic activity also suggests that a working environment can be another source of the social capital needed for civic engagement even in later life and a rural context.

We don't find relationship with locus of control (our proxy for agency) being involved in voluntary work, being part of the local government, or having the experience of running for office. People with an external, internal and transcendental locus of control become involved in these activities to the same extent. However, people with an *external* locus of control had a higher coefficient of statistical association between the indicator "holding office in local government" and "volunteering in social clubs" (cc = 0.286 vs. 0.195 internal, and 0.198 transcendental). This result suggests that people **who are more socially dependent on, and involved with other people and feel more tightly embedded in social networks also have a slightly higher tendency (as well as chance or opportunity) both to be a member of voluntary organizations and to assume political office.** However, more research would be needed to confirm this result for a larger number of interviewees.

According to previously cited literature, active civic engagement should be also associated with a greater level of place attachment, but our data provide only limited support for this finding. From a good governance point of view, it is a positive message that those who hold a political position and/or are engaged in other types of civic activities also feel "truly at home" in their localities, and, of course, this association can be in both directions. Interestingly enough, the experience of "just" running for any local political office doesn't have this beneficial connection with place attachment.

As a higher level of mobility, i.e., spending parts of the normal day outside the village as opposed to being more tightly bound to the home and its vicinity, is associated with, among other things, better health, it comes as no surprise that more mobile older citizens are also more often engaged in civic activities and/or hold political office. However, slightly different factors may be operating in the older adult population as opposed to the working age population. In the latter case, higher

⁸ Con. Coeff. 0.271; 0.315; 0.263; 0.298; 0.370, 0.253 and 0.295, respectively, all p. < 0.001; except university education, where p. < 0.05.

mobility indicates a more intensive work load, which can crowd out non-for-profit activities and is regarded as a potential threat to the density of local social networks (Bernard et al., 2012). In later age, being freed from the necessity to work for pay can, on the other hand, serve as a trigger for a new or intensified career in the civic arena. This typically applies for men, who are more prone to occupying publicly visible positions, while women tend to find their activities within their families and care responsibilities (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Ilinca et al., 2016; Calasanti, Repetti, 2018). This is also reflected in the fact that politics as a life domain increases steeply in importance for men as they age (Vidovičová, 2018). Remarkably in our current dataset, the share of those holding political office was the same for both sexes, but among those who did try to run for office, men were indeed represented more than twice as often (11% vs. 5% in women). A slightly smaller difference can be seen in the case of other civic activities, where men lead women by approximately eleven percentage points (24% vs. 13%). However, this can at least partially be due to the selection of examples of activities quoted in the questionnaire (such as firefighters, hunters, etc.).

Not only being **a man but also having a higher level of education increases the propensity to hold a political office** (cf. Goerres, 2009) as highly educated people may be seen as a better fit for such a position, given the prestige education has in Czech culture. Even though the influence of education on participation levels is dependent on the activity type (Wilson, 2000), in our dataset almost 20% of people with a university degree, as opposed to an average of 8%, ever run for office in local government in the context of rural communities.

Our data show that, overall, the rate of civic engagement in the older population in rural areas is rather low, although, as Munoz et al. (2014) argue, there may be a “few older adults who are willing to participate but are not already doing so” (p. 212). In spite of this, the recorded proportions of involved older adults could be regarded as satisfactory. However, some concerns relate to the process of cumulative dis/advantages (Dannefer, 2003) at play here, as the three main indicators of civic involvement (the acquiring of information, involvement in politics, and volunteering) tend to reinforce each other; thus, it could be always “the usual suspects” when it comes to a civic engagement practices. So, what is civic engagement giving to older social actors in return?

Social aspects of civic engagement and their impact on quality of life

Previous research provides mixed evidence concerning the impact of civic engagement on satisfaction with local government and policy making in particular (Choi, 2003), or quality of life in later age in general (Serrat et al. 2017). Are those older rural dwellers, who participate in social networks actually more imbedded in them and generally more satisfied? Is civic engagement a way of promoting not only active ageing, but also happy ageing-in-place? To answer these questions, we will now look at the differences in answers to questions related to a) satisfaction with local government availability to address relevant issues and its performance, and b) selected aspects of individual indicators of life satisfaction (satisfaction with the surrounding environment), feelings of happiness, and the absence of feelings of loneliness.

In general, our respondents aged 60+ living in rural areas felt that local political representation would be available in cases when they needed to resolve a particular issue, as only 9% reported their politicians were not accessible. However, a relatively smaller percentage (40%) felt that they could reach out for help at any time, while the relative majority (51%) saw this only as an option in the case of urgent and pressing need. As the simple results in Table 4 below show, those who were in any way involved in local life had a stronger feeling that the political representation was there “for them”. Meanwhile, excluding oneself from local life results in a relatively greater risk of deepening the social exclusion from social networks and support nets.

Tab 4. Perception of the availability of local politicians to address any needs of senior citizens (in column and row %).

	Yes, anytime	Yes, if really needed	No
Ever run for office	62.5	35.2	2
Having an office	71.4	23.8	4.8
Being part of a volunteer group	54.1	42.3	3.6
Information: Attends municipal meetings	75.6	17.8	6.7
Information: Local media	46.8	50.3	3
Information: None	22.9	45.7	31.4

Note: All associations are significant at $p. < 0.01$ level.

Question: "If you need to solve a problem related to life in your municipality, would your local representatives (mayor, deputy-mayor, social department, etc.) be available for you?" (In Czech: Kdybyste potřeboval/a vyřešit nějaký problém týkající se života ve Vaší obci, byly by Vám zastupitelé (starosta/tka, místostarosta/ka, sociální odbor, apod.) k dispozici?)

This result is further supported by the association between civic involvement and both subjective happiness and the absence of often feeling lonely (see Table 5.). As before, in our dataset, we cannot distinguish whether happier or less lonely people have a greater chance of becoming elected or involved, but we hypothesise that, in this case, engagement is in the position of the antecedent and a higher quality of life is the result. However, we cannot dismiss the idea that happier older adults get elected more often.

Tab 5. Subjective happiness and loneliness related to the civic engagement role (mean and standard deviation).

		Happiness (mean 4.20 ± 1.89)	Loneliness (mean 4.14 ± 2.53)
Political office	yes	3.07 (±1.32)	3.0 (±1.70)
	no	4.20 (±1.90)	4.16 (±2.53)
Member of a volunteer group	yes	3.68 (±1.71)	3.42 (±2.23)
	no	4.32 (±1.91)	4.30 (±2.56)
Information: Local media	yes	4.12 (±1.80)	3.98 (±2.46)
Information: None	yes	4.58 (±2.05)	4.63 (±2.81)

Note: Differences, where appropriate, significant at $p. < 0.01$ (happiness), and $p. < 0.05$ (loneliness) level.

5. Conclusion and discussion

With this paper, we aimed at enhancing our knowledge on older adults' civic engagement in the specific context of rural communities, which still remains a rather underdeveloped topic (Serrat et al. 2017; Nygard & Jakobsson 2013; Davis et al. 2012). Civic participation is understood as a key concept in the active ageing policy framework (WHO, 2002) and necessity for the further development and sustainability of democracy (Putnam et al., 1993)⁹.

The above-quoted results of our empirical study indicate rather low levels of participation in civil society in smaller municipalities and rural areas. Only 18% of our respondents aged 60 years and older were active members of various associations and clubs. The proportion of older adults engaging in voluntary activities in municipalities in our sample is lower than that recorded in previous study, in which it was found that almost thirty per cent of older adults worked for some voluntary organisation (Petrová Kafková, 2013). In part, this difference can be due to the different methodology used, as respondents in the previous study had a list of organisations to choose from, while in our study it was up to them to self-define their engagement in local voluntary organisations. Apart from this, our survey looked at specific geographical and social places, which in part belong to shrinking regions (Šimon & Mikešová, 2014), and the decline in their populations tends to be accompanied by diminishing services and infrastructure. These trends create

⁹ Please consult the work of the COST Action ROSEnet group (www.rosenetcost.com) on various aspects of the social exclusion in later life, including in the contexts of rural populations and international perspective.

an unfavourable environment and threaten the more vulnerable parts of the population to a greater extent. In socially excluded societies and regions, civic and political involvement tends to decrease as well (Bernard et al., 2012). In this context, it could also be suggested that for the better functioning of civil society, a certain level of trust and social capital must be available and acted upon (Putnam et al., 1993). However, the Czech Republic was recently shown to be among countries with rather low levels of interpersonal trust according to international comparison (Halman, Sieben, & Zundert, 2011). In addition, people in smaller municipalities and with lower levels of education also have lower levels of trust, regardless of their age (Rabušic & Hamanová, 2009). The relative absence of these cultural and social preconditions can cumulate the risks leading to lower levels of (formal) civic engagement among older adults in rural areas.

This could be illustrated by a small but important group of the oldest old men and women with low education and weak place attachment, who, despite living in a particular area for a long time, do not feel at home and as a result do not participate in local civil society. These usual suspects could be defined as a group potentially benefiting from interventions aiming to promote civic and political engagement and strengthen active ageing in the place. Our data confirm previous research (Bernard et al., 2012) that place attachment is strongly associated with an interest in local issues and can lead to greater involvement. The feeling of detachment or alienation could be understood as a manifestation of anomie, leading to the impression that we cannot influence things or people around us, as confirmed by the above-quoted association with locus of control. Rabušic and Mareš (1996) previously showed that people living in smaller settlements tend to have higher levels of anomie than people living in bigger towns. And, interestingly enough, this notion was also expressed in other contexts by older adults living in urban areas when talking about older adults living in rural areas (Vidovičová, & Gregorová, 2008), as if agency was a typical feature of urban life, while decreased agency was an inherent part of the risk of rural social exclusion¹⁰.

Our findings are in line with those of Nygard et al. (2015) in that they show a strong association between individual-level membership in voluntary associations and political participation. Older adults in rural areas also tend to exhibit high levels of place attachment with three quarters of respondents stating that they “feel at home”, which is again one of the preconditions for civic engagement. This in turn fosters greater life satisfaction (McMunn, Nazroo, Wahrendorf, Breeze, & Zaninotto, 2009; Wilson, 2000). People in later life stages still play an important role in the sustainability of rural communities (Davis et al. 2012), and this role is an important enhancer of their life quality. We can agree with Kruse and Schmitt (2015) that supportive environments are a key factor in the long-term sustainability of civic engagement, especially in later life stages and among the oldest citizens, which is also indicated in our data by the generally high level of satisfaction expressed with the accessibility of local political representation in cases of need.

As is the case with many empirical studies, this study also has its limitations. The diversity of local political structures, living environments, and older populations themselves is extremely wide and the mutual relationships between these components extremely complicated on many levels of analysis (Petriwskyj et al., 2017). For the sake of clarity, we have restricted our attention to just a small range of these empirical relationships. For example, according to Munoz et al. (2014) and others, older rural adults tend to exhibit high levels of civic participation, but at a lower intensity. Using our recent data set, we couldn't resolve this distinction and, therefore, we cannot give a full account of the different types of participatory activities. As already stated above several times, the methodology used will have a great impact on the results obtained. It seems that providing respondents with a full list of activities or at least employing open-ended variants of the question concerning activities could have revealed a more accurate picture. Our dataset was limited to people aged 60 years and older; therefore, in future projects, it would be very interesting to follow

¹⁰ This study was looking at different aspects of age discrimination and during one of the focus group discussions a female participant said: “There are a lot of pensioners in the villages, right. They might benefit from a lower cost of living than in the city. But then, they don't know how to fight for their living conditions like a city pensioner does, they can't stand up for themselves like a city pensioner can, as they don't have anybody around to help them.” (In Czech: Když máte na vesnici spoustu důchodců, že. Jim se tam třeba žije levněji než důchodcům ve městě, ale zase nedovedou se bít za ty svoje podmínky, za které zase se může tady ten důchodce ve městech tak nějak postavit a nemají proto nikoho kolem sebe, který by jim pomohl.) (Vidovičová, Gregorová, 2008, p. 39)

comparisons with the younger population living in the same geographical and social areas. Results presented by Majerová et al. (2005) are suggesting that in rural areas, it is especially younger cohorts who organise and participate in activities such as keeping the traditions or volunteering more often. Similarly, comparison with urban populations would also be of interest. Therefore, we propose to address these issues in further studies of the quality of life of older adults in rural communities, as our analysis here showed untapped potential of older adults for civic engagement in rural areas and the need for better targeted strategies and measures to engage older adults, to use alternative communication channels to reach out to different target groups of this heterogeneous and changing population. Older adults' engagement will become more critical for development and cohesion of local communities in the near future, as the numbers of older adults will grow, and rural areas will remain a preferred living environment for considerable share of European citizens.

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