

## THE ROLE OF SUB-MUNICIPAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

**Danijela Romić, PhD, Senior Lecturer**

University of Applied Sciences “Lavoslav Ružička” in Vukovar  
Blage Zadre 2, Vukovar, Croatia  
dromic@vevu.hr

### **ABSTRACT**

*The basis of every democratic legal order is the involvement of citizens in decision-making. The Member States of the European Union have established such a legal framework that encourages democracy, especially the involvement of citizens, openness and transparency, the principle of subsidiarity and other principles expressed in the corresponding legal documents. Numerous scientific studies have proven that the Europeans expect much more from democracy than the minimum. The model of liberal democracy rests on achieving the widest possible consensus when making decisions. Nevertheless, citizen involvement in making political decisions has its shortcomings, which are often overemphasized, all with the aim of excluding citizens from the decision-making process on public policies. The biggest opponents of true citizen involvement are politicians whose “power” is limited by citizen involvement models. One of the key arguments against citizen involvement is the inability and reluctance of “ordinary” citizens to make quality decisions. Inclusion and participation models are very diverse. This paper puts an emphasis on realizing the principle of subsidiarity through citizen participation in decision-making at local levels through sub-municipal self-government form.*

*This paper presents the results of research aimed at gaining insight into the attitudes and opinions of local politicians (chiefs/mayors, presidents of representative bodies of local self-government units and council members of sub-municipal committees) in Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties on the need for and opportunities for citizen participation through sub-municipal self-government form. For the purposes of the research, a questionnaire was prepared and sent to the respondents via e-mail. The starting hypothesis of the paper is H1: Local politicians do not support sub-municipal decentralization. Descriptive statistics and appropriate statistical analyses were used to analyse the research results (Kruskal-Wallis H test with Bonferroni test as a post-hoc test, Mann Whitney U test, Kendall’s Tau-b correlation coefficient ( $\tau_b$ ), Cramer’s V ( $\varphi_c$ ) and Ordinal Regression PLUM analysis). The results show statistically significant differences in the responses between individual categories of respondents.*

*In addition to the introductory part, the paper consists of a theoretical part that argues the importance of citizen participation in decision-making as a key element of democracy, a descrip-*

*tion of the methodology of the conducted research, research results, and finally the conclusion. The paper's contribution to administrative science is reflected in a comprehensive theoretical analysis and original research results that can serve as a basis for empowering citizens and their true involvement in decision-making.*

**Keywords:** *citizen participation, democracy, principle of subsidiarity, sub-municipal self-government*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on democracy, its sense, principles and its actual implementation can often lead to a philosophical debate. Is democracy such a system in which all the citizens participate in decision-making or is it only an auxiliary method for the purposes of decision-making? To which extent should citizens be allowed to influence the decision-making process? Is the so-called aggregative model of democracy (decisions are made by rule of majority) a valid guarantee of just, legal and legitimate decisions or is it necessary to accept integrative democracy that tries to reach a consensus between as many stakeholders as possible?<sup>1</sup> The human-citizen is only free when it is possible for him to follow the eternal laws of nature and order, only when he achieves self-realisation through his citizen participation in public life.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore justified to claim that the integral part of the definition of democracy is involvement of citizens in relevant decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Citizen participation in decision-making processes for all relevant issues of public politics is an integral part of multilevel governance, a new form of governance formed as a response to increasing complexity of relationships between people, individual levels of government within the country and among countries. The decision-making in multilevel governance allows the involvement of transnational and global institutions (up-scaling) and sub-national levels (down-scaling).<sup>4</sup> The sub-national levels are precisely the ones this paper is focusing on, especially the structures belonging to the lowest, the sub-municipal level. Sub-municipal communities are deeply rooted in the tradition of local governance due to their role in ensuring specific needs of citizens, in preserving

<sup>1</sup> The division to aggregative and integrative democracy is stated by Loughlin, J.; Hendriks, F.; Lidstrom, A., *Subnational democracy in Europe: Changing Backgrounds and Theoretical Models*, in: Loughlin, J.; Hendriks, F.; Lidstrom, A. (eds.), *Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> Kovačić S., *Etičnost politike u Aristotela*, Filozofska istraživanja, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2006, pp. 469; Lalović, D., *Nedovršena država? Suвременa država u svjetlu Rousseauove teorije općenite volje*, Politička misao, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, 2002, pp. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Lauc, Z., *Oblikovanje hrvatske lokalne samouprave u svjetlu ratifikacije Europske povelje o lokalnoj samoupravi*, in: Brunčić, D.; Friederich, F.; Jurić, D.; Lauc, Z. (eds.), *Europska povelja o lokalnoj samoupravi i lokalna samouprava u Republici Hrvatskoj, Osječko-baranjska županija*, Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku i Veleposlanstvo lokalne demokracije Slavonije, Osijek, 1998, pp. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Lowndes, V., Sullivan, H., *How Low You Can Go? Rationales and Challenges for neighbourhood Governance*, Public Administration, Vol. 86, No. 1, 2008, pp. 54.

the socio-cultural identities and maintaining the local sense of community.<sup>5</sup> Sub-municipal units have special importance in the governance of large cities where they can serve to strengthen democracy, but they can also lead to the disintegration of city management.<sup>6</sup> The sub-municipal levels in Croatia are presented by sub-municipal self-government (sub-municipal committees and town districts), structures that can be established within a district or in one part of the district as instances of immediate citizen participation in decision-making regarding local affairs which on daily basis directly influence the life and work of citizens.<sup>7,8</sup> In accordance with legal definitions, the competence of sub-municipal self-government forms is almost insignificant and based mainly on its advisory character. The legislator has allowed complete freedom to units of local government in deciding whether to establish sub-municipal self-government or not, along with the scope of their competence. Local political officials, who can determine the outcome of the initiative for establishing sub-municipal self-government are the ones with the most influence.

In addition to the introductory part, the paper consists of a theoretical part that researches the importance of citizen participation in decision-making as a key element of democracy, a description of the methodology of the conducted research, research results, and finally the conclusion.

## 2. INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

Involvement of citizens in decision-making rests on the democratic ideal of public and argumentative discussion resulting in decisions that support public preferences and are acceptable for the community.<sup>9</sup> The process has to necessarily be followed

<sup>5</sup> Hlepas, N.K.; Kerstig, N.; Kuhlmann, S.; Swianiewicz, P.; Teles, F., *Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier*; In: Hlepas, N.K.; Kerstig, N.; Kuhlmann, S.; Swianiewicz, P.; Teles, F. (eds.), *Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Đulabić, V., *Lokalna samouprava i decentralizacija u Hrvatskoj*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Zagreb, 2018, pp. 4; Ivanišević, S., *Europska iskustva u decentralizaciji upravljanja velikim gradovima*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2008, pp. 420.

<sup>7</sup> Law on Local and Regional Self-Government, Official Gazette, No. 90//2001.

<sup>8</sup> The correctness of this legal structure is questionable since sub-municipal committees and town districts present a form of indirect decision-making. Namely, the citizens elect the councils of sub-municipal committees and town districts which then take part in the decision-making representing the citizens from that smaller area. In order for sub-municipal structures to be forms of direct involvement, they must not be representative bodies, indirect forms of citizens' involvement. More in: Rešetar, V., *Istraživanje mjesne samouprave i neposrednog sudjelovanja građana u javnim poslovima na mjesnoj razini*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, pp. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, C. W., *Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of Public Engagement Industry*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 34; Irvin, R. A., Stansbury, J., *Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort?* Public Administration Review, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2004, pp. 56.

by redistribution of power, otherwise it is a frustrating and meaningless process for those without power allowing the governing bodies to use it as an alibi for apparent involvement of citizens.<sup>10</sup> The concept of involvement implies all the activities through which citizens are able to influence the decision-making process, and not merely involvement in political processes.<sup>11</sup> Through involvement of citizens, their decision-making skills are being strengthened, in addition to encouraging their rational decision-making, intensifying the legitimacy of the decision-making process, acquiring wide support for individual public politics, increasing trust in the institutions of representative democracy and lowering public expenses.<sup>12</sup> Involvement of citizens annuls the effects of the legitimation crisis and demographic deficit. The legitimation crisis occurs as a result of alienation of government and politicians from the electoral base whereby citizens experience the feeling of being powerless, repulsed and distrustful towards political decisions.<sup>13</sup> The consequence of legitimation crisis is a demographic deficit – a situation in which there is discrepancy between the ones who govern, and the ones being governed.<sup>14</sup> This discrepancy can be overcome by involvement of citizens, which represents an addition to representative democracy, since it bridges the gap created between the elected representatives and their voters.<sup>15</sup> However, do citizens even want to be involved? One of the most common arguments of those opposing involvement is the lack of will for involvement. Therefore, numerous research had been conducted, which imply that those more likely to be involved are the citizens with

<sup>10</sup> Arnstein, S. R., *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, Journal of the American Planning Association, 35: 4, 1969, pp. 216.

<sup>11</sup> Schlozman, K. L.; Verba, S.; Brady, H. E., *The Unevenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, Princeton University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 10-13.

<sup>12</sup> Schnaudt, C., *Political Confidence and Democracy in Europe: Antecedents and Consequences of Citizens' Confidence in Representative and Regulative Institutions and Authorities*, Springer, Mannheim, 2019, p. 276; Kern, A., *What happens after a local referendum? The effect of direct democratic decision-making on protest intentions*, Local Government Studies, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2018, pp. 183.; Manojlović Toman, R.; Vukojičić Tomić, T., *Načelo demokracije Europske povelje o lokalnoj samoupravi i sudjelovanje građana u hrvatskoj lokalnoj samoupravi*, in: Koprić, I. (ed.), *Europeizacija hrvatske lokalne samouprave*, Institut za javnu upravu, Zagreb, 2018, p. 345.; Matsusaka, J. G., *Public policy and the initiative and referendum: a survey with some new evidence*, Public Choice, Vol. 174, 2018, p. 108.; Michels, A.; de Graaf, L., *Examining citizen participation: local participatory policymaking and democracy revisited*, Local Government Studies, 43:6, 2017, p. 875.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart, J., *The Dilemmas of Engagement - The Role of Consultation in Governance*, Anu Press, Canberra, 2009, p. 67; Ferrin, M.; Kriesi, H., *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Stewart, J., pp. 11-13.

<sup>15</sup> Garcia-Espin, P.; Ganuza, E.; Marco, de S., *Assemblies, Referendums or Consultations? Social Representations of Citizen Participation*, Revista Espanola de Investigaciones Sociologicas, No. 157, 2017, p. 59.; Koprić, I., *Decentralizacija i dobro upravljanje gradovima*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009, p. 76.

higher socio-economic status,<sup>16</sup> those motivated by friends or relatives,<sup>17</sup> women who are greatly trusted by their partners,<sup>18</sup> whereas size and population density of the local unit have contradictory effects.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, various social movements and citizen initiatives appearing throughout the globe prove that citizens want to be involved due to dissatisfaction with the current government, especially if their involvement makes sense.<sup>20</sup> The second reason against involvement is the mistrust of officials towards the involvement of citizens because they feel threatened.<sup>21</sup> This in particular, because there is a notable increase in decision-making by officials which is unacceptable: decisions are made by political bodies, officials follow those decisions.<sup>22</sup> One of the most offensive arguments against citizens' involvement is the elitist argument questioning the intelligence and cognitive abilities of the citizens.<sup>23</sup> This is the argument against democracy itself,<sup>24</sup> one most frequently highlighted by politicians since they refuse to share the government.<sup>25</sup> Politicians

<sup>16</sup> Verba *et al.*, 1995 in Lowndes, V.; Pratchett, L.; Stoker, G., *Local Political Participation: the Impact of rules-in-use*, Public Administration, Vol. 84, Issue 3, 2006, p. 540.; Pattie, C. J.; Seyd, P.; Whiteley, P., *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 92-93.; Stoker, G., *Engaging Citizens: Can Westminster coexist with meaningful citizen-centric engagement?* in: Lindquist, E. A.; Vincent, S.; Wanna, J. (eds.), *Putting Citizens First, Engagement in Policy and Service Delivery for the 21st Century*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2013, pp. 31-32.

<sup>17</sup> Brady, H. E.; Scholzman, K. L., Verba, S., *Prospecting for Participants: Rational Expectations and the Recruitment of Political Activists*, The American Political Science Review, Vol. 93, No. 1., 1999, pp. 154-155.

<sup>18</sup> Burns, N.; Scholzman, K.L., Verba, S., *The Public Consequences of Private Inequality: Family Life and Citizen Participation*, The American Political Science Review, Vol. 91, No. 2, 1997, p 382.

<sup>19</sup> The bigger the local unit, the lesser the involvement due to loss of social connections and reduction of psychological connection between people. On the other hand, in more densely populated units, it is possible for the citizens' involvement to increase. According to: Tavares, A. F.; Carr, J. B., *So Close, Yet so far away? The Effects of City Size, Density and Growth on Local Civic Participation*, Journal of Urban Affairs, 35(3), 2013, pp. 298-299.

<sup>20</sup> Edelenbos, J.; Meerkerk, van I., *Three reflecting perspectives on interactive governance*, in: Edelenbos, J.; Meerkerk, van I. (eds.), *Critical Reflections on Interactive Governance, Self-organization and Participation in Public Governance*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, Northampton, 2016, pp. 1-3.; Lassen, D. D.; Serritzlew, S., *Jurisdiction Size and Local Democracy: Evidence on Internal Political Efficacy from Large-scale Municipal Reform*, American Political Science Review, Vol. 105, No. 2, 2011, p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> Kathi, P. C.; Cooper, T. L., *Democratizing the Administrative State: Connecting Neighborhood Councils and City Agencies*, Public Administration Review, 65 (5), 2005, p. 562.

<sup>22</sup> Bakota, B.; Ljubanović, B., *Citizen participation as a form of active control of public administration*, in: Bencsik, A.; Fulop, P. (eds.), *Jogasz doktoranduszok I. Pecs Talalkozója*, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, T. G., *Politicizing Digital Space: Theory, The Internet, and Renewing Democracy*, University of Westminster Press, London, 2017, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Matsusaka, J. G., *Direct Democracy Works*, The Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Kettl, D., *Beyond New Public Management: Will governments let citizens and communities determine policy choices and service mixes?* in: Lindquist, E., Vincent, S., Wanna, J. (eds.), *Putting Citizens First: Engagement in Policy and Service Delivery for the 21st Century*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2013, p. 39.

consider the voters to be capable of only voting for them, everything else is believed to be far too complicated for them.<sup>26</sup>

Involvement of citizens is possible on every level of governance, however, the strongest motivation for involvement appears on the lowest levels of governance since the decisions directly affect specific issues dealt with by the community. The importance of involvement of citizens and decision-making on the lowest levels of governance is promoted by the European Charter of Local Self-Government which introduces the principle of subsidiarity<sup>27</sup> and the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority.<sup>28</sup> According to the principle of subsidiarity the higher authority is obligated to assist the lower authority while at the same time allowing the lower authority to be effective and act independently in accordance to their competence.<sup>29</sup> The principle of subsidiarity stimulates internal decentralisation of local government units which implies the transfer of responsibility to self-government territorial structures within the local government unit – a double devolution.<sup>30</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that they are not autonomous, they represent an informal level of authority without formal jurisdiction which is just one of the ways of bringing authority closer to citizens.<sup>31</sup> The extent to which the sub-municipal units are to be involved in the decision-making processes depends on numerous factors. The most important factor is the finances and the financial means provided by the local authorities, followed by clear and well-defined jurisdiction and the level of autonomy.<sup>32</sup> The scope of acceptance and implementation of internal decentralization depends solely on the attitudes of local political leaders.<sup>33</sup> As has

<sup>26</sup> Bakota, B.; Ljubanović, B., *op. cit.*, note 22, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> European Charter of Local Self-Government, Official Gazette, International Agreements. No. 14/1997, 4/2008.

<sup>28</sup> Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, [https://rm.coe.int/168008482a], Accessed 14 February 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Bakota, B.; Dujmović Bocka, J., *Načelo supsidijarnosti i zaštita životinja*, in: Sudarić, Ž.; Belaj, I.; Stojanović, S. (eds.), Zbornik 12. Međunarodne konferencija Razvoj javne uprave, Veleučilište „Lavoslav Ružička“ u Vukovaru, Vukovar, 2022, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Pycok, G., *London governance and the politics of neighbourhood planning: a case for investigation*, Town Planning Review, Vol. 91, Issue 1, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Klarić, M., *New Perspective in Development of Local Self-Government*, US-China Law Review, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2020, p. 138.

<sup>32</sup> Haček, M., Grabner, A., *Local Sub-Decentralization and Sub-Municipal Division in Slovenia*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2013, pp. 217; Koprić, I.; Klarić, M., *New Developments in Local Democracy in Croatia*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2015, p. 401.

<sup>33</sup> Swianiewicz, P., *Inter-Municipal Units in Urban Political Systems in Poland: Vicious Roundabout of Marginalization or Dead-End Street?* The NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy, Vol. VII, No. 2, 2014, p. 186.

already been mentioned, local politicians are not precisely keen on internal decentralization.<sup>34</sup>

Legislative regulation of internal decentralization of local units in Croatia is reduced to a minimum, the units of local government (hereinafter: ULGs) enjoy the freedom to regulate all the issues regarding sub-municipal self-government through their statutes. The initiative for establishing a sub-municipal self-government unit can be suggested by citizens, members of representative bodies and other bodies regulated by the statute.<sup>35</sup> The bodies occurring in every form of sub-municipal self-governments are the council – elected directly by the citizens and the council president elected by the members of the council. The law specifies only two authorities of the councils of sub-municipal committees: organizing citizens' assemblies and presenting their work programme. The council of sub-municipal committee can be assigned specific activities from the self-governing scope through the directives from the statute. In that case, necessary finances from the budget must be ensured for these functions. The law does not proscribe any original financial means for the work of councils of sub-municipal committees. This situation is not stimulative for sub-municipal self-government units. Sub-municipal self-government does not contribute to the legitimacy of the general order, nor does it affect the real Europeanisation process of the Croatian local government. The main reason for this situation is lack of political engagement for internal decentralization of local units.<sup>36</sup>

Considering that the lack of political will has repeatedly been detected as the key issue, the aim of this paper is to determine the attitude of local officials in Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties regarding the sub-municipal self-government. There are totally 74 ULGs in these two counties, however, in only 19 ULGs sub-municipal self-government has been established (in comparison, in 2022 there were 127 structures of sub-municipal self-government and in 2018 there were 208).<sup>37</sup> This worrying trend of decrease of the numbers of sub-municipal self-government structures can also be connected to political reluctance since executive officials and members of representative bodies are the key decision-makers responsible for their

<sup>34</sup> Hlepas, N. K., *Between Identity Politics and the Politics of Scale: Sub-municipal Governance in Greece*, in: Hlepas, N.K.; Kerstig, N.; Kuhlmann, S.; Swianiewicz, P.; Teles, F. (eds.), *Sub-Municipal Governance in Europe: Decentralization Beyond the Municipal Tier*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 126.; Pycok, G. *op. cit.*, note 29, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Regulation of sub-municipal self-government is defined by articles 57 to 66 of the Law on Local and Regional Self-Government, Official Gazette No. 33/2001, 60/2001, 1239/2005, 26/2009, 109/2007, 125/2008, 150/2011, 144/2012, 123/2017, 98/2019, 144/2020.

<sup>36</sup> Manojlović Toman, R.; Vukojičić Tomić, T.; Koprić, I., *Neuspješna europeizacija hrvatske mjesne samouprave: nedovoljna atraktivnost ili loše institucionalno oblikovanje*, Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti Hrvatske, Vol. X, No. 1, 2019, pp. 199-200.

<sup>37</sup> The above-mentioned data are the result of independent research through overview of the web pages of the units of local self-government.

cancellations (sub-municipal self-government is abolished by a simple change of statute). Based on the analysis of the previous research, hypothesis H1 was formed - Local politicians do not support sub-municipal decentralization.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering the stated aim of the paper, the target group of respondents were local political officials who play a significant role in decision-making processes regarding establishment, competence, finances and activities of sub-municipal self-government. First of all, structures of sub-municipal self-government are established by a statute passed by the representative body of the municipality or a city as a body formally competent to pass general and individual acts. Since members of representative bodies are quite numerous and their contact details were unavailable, the target group of the respondents was narrowed only to the presidents of the representative bodies. The other key group were executive officials (mayors and municipal prefects) who propose general and individual acts to the representative body and by doing so indirectly influence its decisions. The total number of respondents in both categories was 148. The third category of respondents were council members of the sub-municipal committees and town districts. They are directly chosen citizens' representatives within their local unit who should have the best insight in the current state of the sub-municipal self-government in the two observed counties. Due to the number of the established structures of sub-municipal self-government, the potential number of respondents in this category is 809 which makes a total number of respondents in this research 957. For the purposes of the research, a questionnaire was prepared that was available for use on LimeSurvey service from November 15<sup>th</sup> to December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The link was sent to respondents per email.<sup>38</sup> There were 33 questions in the questionnaire: 11 questions referred to general information about the respondents (age, gender, education, political orientation, length of political activity, political function, length of political function, length of residence in ULG), 4 questions were directed at the type of the ULG the respondent comes from, 17 questions referred to personal opinions and attitudes of the respondent regarding the sub-municipal self-government and the last question was an open-ended question allowing ad-

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<sup>38</sup> An additional challenge in this research was collecting the e-mail addresses of the potential respondents. Namely, the web pages of the municipalities and towns offer only e-mail addresses of the executive officials, while any information about the e-mail addresses of the presidents of representative bodies and council members of sub-municipal committees is lacking. Heads of competent administrative departments were therefore contacted by telephone, however, not even they had the requested information, especially those for council members of sub-municipal committees. In such cases, a link for accessing the questionnaire was sent on the official e-mail addresses of municipalities or towns with a request to forward it to the respondents.



ditional comments.<sup>39</sup> Questions referring to personal opinions and attitudes of the respondent regarding the sub-municipal self-government were closed questions and the answers were shown through the 5-point Likert scale consisting of (1 - Strongly Disagree; 2 -Disagree; 3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly Agree). For result analysis, in addition to the descriptive statistics, appropriate statistical methods were used. To determine the differences in attitudes of the respondents about the sub-municipal self-government based on gender (3 groups: male, female, other) and their official duty (3 groups: mayors/municipal prefects, presidents of town/municipal councils, members of sub-municipal committees/town districts) Kruskal-Wallis H test with Bonferroni test as a post-hoc test was applied. To determine the differences in attitudes depending on the ULG the respondents come from Mann Whitney U test was used (2 groups: town, municipality). The level of statistical significance is determined at  $p \leq 0.05$ . In order to determine the connection between the answers provided by respondents from question 16 to question 30 and independent (categorical) variables Kendall's Tau-b correlation coefficient ( $\tau_b$ ) was used. The result interpretation: +/- 0.1 very weak correlation, +/- 0.1 to 0.19 weak correlation, +/- 0.2 to 0.29 moderate correlation, +/- 0.30 and > strong correlation. For the purposes of determining how the duty of the officials influences their attitudes in statements 16 to 30, Ordinal Regression PLUM analysis was conducted, whereby the respondents' official duties and their age (Covariates(s)) was used as the independent variable (Fixed factor(s)) while the answers from the Likert scale to statements 16 to 30 were used as the dependent variable (Dependent). For assessment of assumptions regarding the implementation of ordinal regression the Test of parallel lines was used. The level of statistical significance is determined at level  $p \leq 0.05$ . For testing the hypothesis set in this paper, only the answers to 5 relevant questions from the questionnaire were used. Apart from the questionnaire prepared and used for the purposes of conducting empirical research, the information about the number of established structures of sub-municipal self-government, the number of council members of sub-municipal committees and the competence of sub-municipal committees were collected through a detailed analysis of publicly available data on official websites of ULGs.

## 4. RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### 4.1. General information about the respondents

From the total number of potential respondents, 272 respondents answered the questions from the questionnaire, whereas 56 did not complete the questionnaire

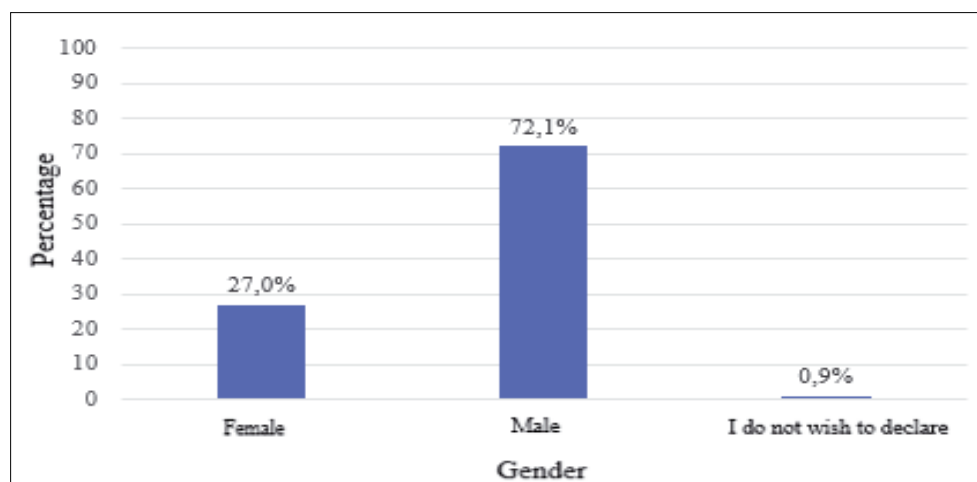
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<sup>39</sup> This research was conducted for the purposes of writing a doctoral dissertation. The paper will show only a small part of the results of the conducted research relevant for its topic.

and were therefore excluded from the analysis. The analysis of the answers was done on 216 respondents which represents 22,57% of all the potential respondents, which is a representative sample of respondents. Charts 1 to 4 show research results of the respondents for independent variables of the research (gender, age, political orientation and the size of the ULG), while other data referring to the other two independent variables are mentioned further in the text (political function and the type of the ULG the respondents come from).

Chart 1 shows that there were more male than female respondents in the research which was not unexpected considering the representation of women in politics in general,<sup>40</sup> but in the ULGs as well. According to the research results regarding the gender structure of council members of sub-municipal committees, there are 23,17% of women in Osijek-Baranja county, while in Vukovar-Srijem county there are 25,53%.

*Chart 1* – Distribution of respondents based on gender



Source: author's interpretations

Results from previously conducted research show that people of older age are more frequently involved in politics, especially on sub-municipal levels.<sup>41</sup> Chart 2 illustrates the opposite. The results obtained in this research show that 58,8% of

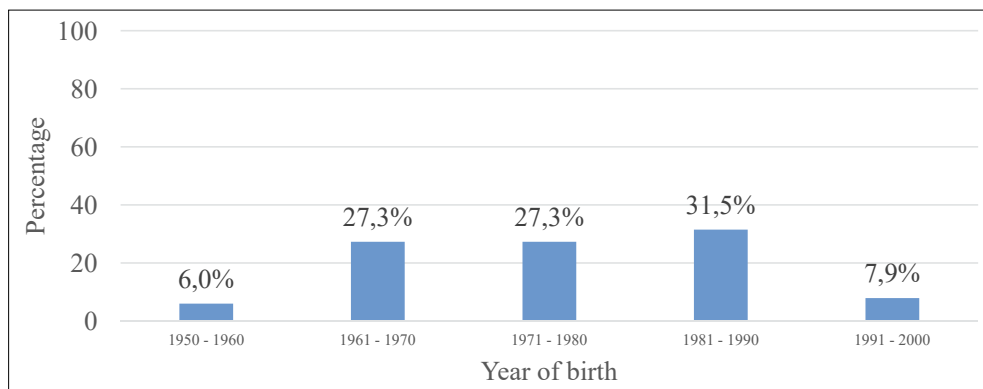
<sup>40</sup> Ryan, M.; Stoker, G.; John, P.; Moseley, A.; James, O.; Richardson, L.; Vannoni, M., „*How best to open up local democracy? A randomised experiment to encourage contested elections and greater representativeness in England parish councils*“, *Local Government Studies*, 2018, pp. 1-22, [[https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/97963135/How\\_best\\_to\\_open\\_up\\_RYAN\\_Firstonline2July2018\\_GREEN\\_AAM.pdf](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/97963135/How_best_to_open_up_RYAN_Firstonline2July2018_GREEN_AAM.pdf)], Accessed 22 January 2020.

<sup>41</sup> See in: Hrženjak, J., *Ustrojstvo i funkcioniranje mjesne samouprave u Gradu Zagrebu*, Hrvatska i komparativna javna uprava, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, p. 48.; Swianiewicz, P., Chelstowska, K., *Neighbourhood*

respondents belong to the age group from 32 to 51 years of age which indicates that younger persons are actively involved in political activities in Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties.

By analysing the data available on the web sites, it was established that 72,41% of council members of the sub-municipal committees/town districts in Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem county belong to Croatian Democratic Union, while 13,96% constitute the average share of independent lists or lists of group of candidates (whereas the proportion of the number of independent candidates in Osijek-Baranja county is double (18,70%) when compared to Vukovar-Srijem county (9,22%)). From 19 ULGs in which the sub-municipal self-government had been previously established, in 14 ULGs the executive officer is the member of the Croatian Democratic Union. Similar pattern occurs when observing political orientation of presidents of representative bodies.

*Chart 2* - Distribution of respondents based on the year of birth



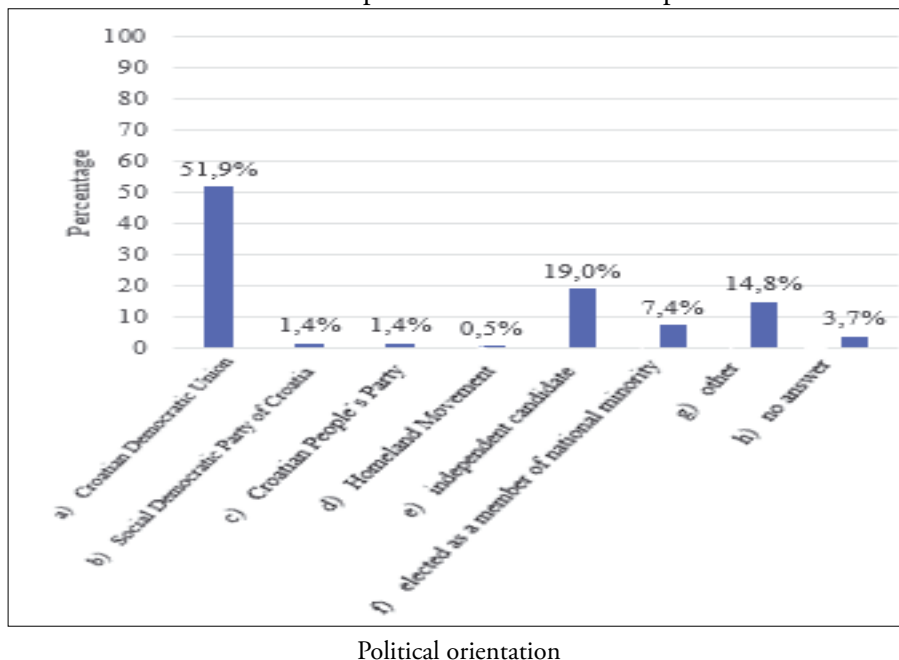
Source: author's interpretations

Chart 3 shows the distribution of respondents based on political orientation, while Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on the political orientation and political function of the respondents.

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*Council as a Path of Political Career Development in Poland*, Polish Sociological Review, Vol. 190/2, 2015, p. 225.

Chart 3 – Distribution of the respondents based on their political orientation



Source: author's interpretations

Table 1 – Distribution of respondents based on their political orientation and political function

Political function	Political orientation							Total
	CDU	SDP	CPP	HM	IC	NM	Other	
Mayor/Municipal prefect	12	1	0	0	8	0	4	25
President of the municipal/town council	15	1	1	0	9	0	7	33
Member of council of sub-municipal committee/town district	80	1	2	1	23	16	21	144
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>202*</b>

Source: author's interpretations

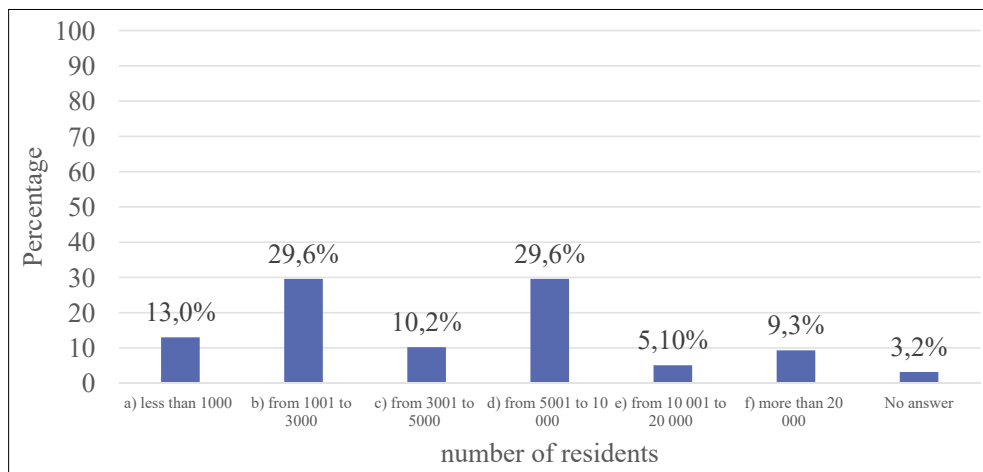
\*The total number of respondents is 216, some respondents did not provide an answer to these questions. Legend: CDU – Croatian Democratic Union, SDP – Social Democratic Party of Croatia, CPP – Croatian People's Party, HM – Homeland Movement, IC – Independent Candidate, NM – National Minority.

Considering the real number of officials based on their political orientation, the provided data indicates that the local officials, candidates of independent lists, are more likely to participate in this type of research than the members of the majority political party. For the purposes of the analysis of the results, the key independent variable was the function the officials obtain. Table 1 shows that 25 executive offi-

cials (11,6% of the respondents), 33 presidents of representative bodies (15,3% of the respondents) and 144 council members of sub-municipal committees (68,1% of the respondents) completed the questionnaire. Another important variable was the type of the ULGs the respondents come from, 43,5% live in municipalities and 53,2% in towns. In the two observed counties, sub-municipal self-government was established in 9 municipalities and 10 towns. The size of the ULGs the respondents come from was also one of important variables. According to the 2021 Croatian Census, in the two observed counties there were 42 ULGs or 56,32% which belong in the category of small units with 1.001 to 3.000 residents, 11 units or 14,86% in the category of 5.001 to 10.000 residents, while only 4 towns had more than 20.000 residents. The only major discrepancy was the city of Osijek with its 96.313 residents.<sup>42</sup> Chart 4 shows that almost one third of the respondents live in ULGs with a small number of residents (from 1.001 to 3.000) and in ULGs that have between 5.001 and 10.000 residents.

The answers to five relevant questions from the questionnaire were chosen to test the outlined hypothesis (H1 - Local politicians do not support sub-municipal decentralization). These questions refer to expressions of respondents' personal opinions and attitudes regarding the necessity of establishing sub-municipal self-government in their ULGs and the benefits resulting from it, as well as those referring to scope of its competence and the interest of citizens for active involvement.

*Chart 4* – Distribution of respondents based on the number of residents in the ULG they come from



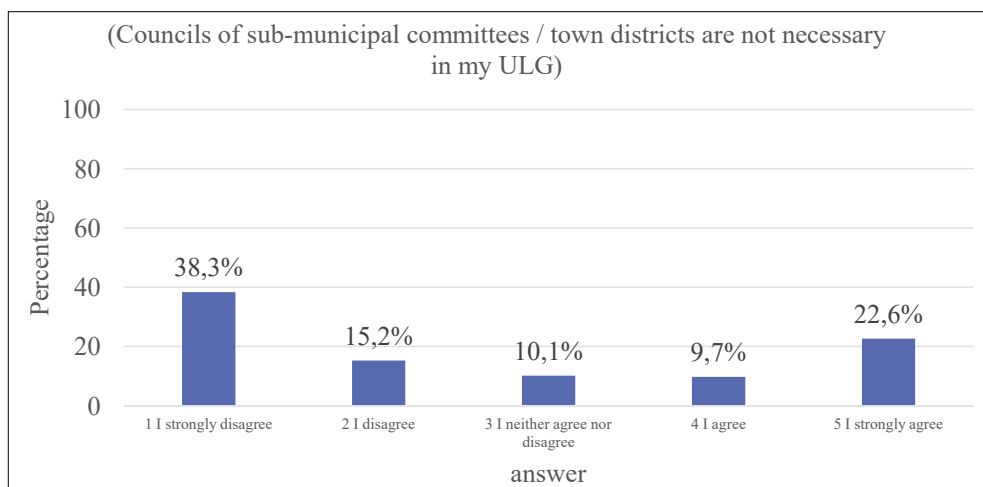
Source: author's interpretations

<sup>42</sup> Croatian Bureau of Statistics, [https://podaci.dzs.hr/media/bz5hplcj/gradovi-u-statistici.xlsx], Accessed 27 January 2023.

## 5. RESEARCH RESULTS ABOUT SUB-MUNICIPAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

Since local politicians had expressed their negative attitude about internal decentralization in previous research, the respondents were now offered a statement claiming that sub-municipal self-government is not required in their ULG. Chart 5 shows the respondents' answers from which it is evident that the majority does not support this claim. This result is expected considering that most respondents are council members of sub-municipal committees and would not therefore consider themselves redundant. However, a more significant piece of information is that 32,2% of the respondents strongly agree or agree with the statement.

*Chart 5* – Distribution of answers to the statement that sub-municipal self-government is not necessary in their ULG



Source: author's interpretations

Statistical analysis shows that executive officials strongly agree with the mentioned statement, presidents of town and municipal councils agree, whereas council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts disagree. There are statistically significant differences in these attitudes, most prominent being the attitudes of mayors/municipal chiefs and council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts ( $p=0.000$ ). Regression analysis shows that mayors/municipal prefects express a different attitude regarding this statement with evident statistical significance (1.74;  $p=0.000$ ) when compared to the attitudes of council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts and presidents of town/municipal council (0.86;  $p=0.02$ ). Mayors/municipal prefects strongly agree with that statement, presidents of representative bodies agree, while the members disagree with it. In order to accurately illustrate the distribution of answers and to determine the

differences in respondents' attitudes based on the length of their political function, Table 2 shows their answers expressed in median values.

*Table 2* – Distribution of answers to the statements from the chart in accordance with the 5-point Likert scale based on the length of the respondents' political functions, expressed in median values

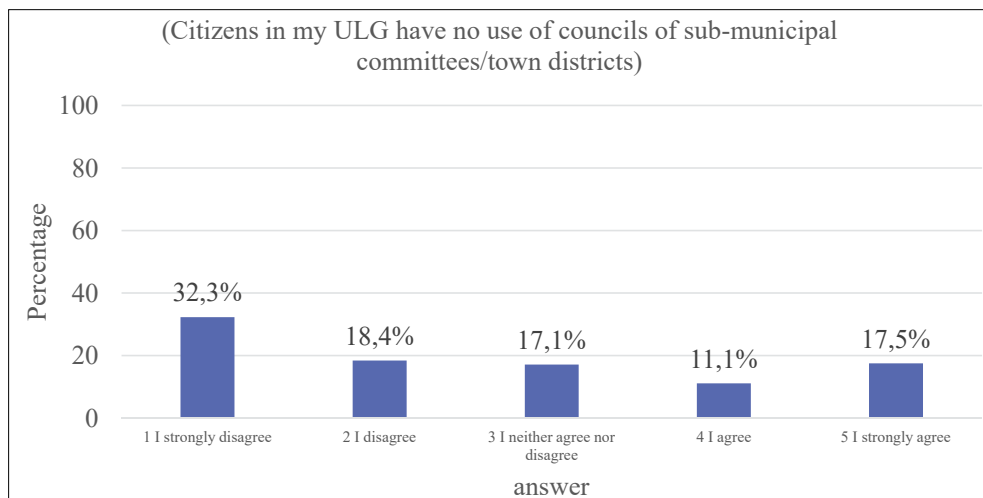
<b>Statement</b>	<b>Chart 5</b>	<b>Chart 6</b>	<b>Chart 7</b>	<b>Chart 8</b>	<b>Chart 9</b>
Mayor/municipal prefect	5	5	3	4	4
President of town or municipal council	4	4	3	3	3
Member of sub-municipal committee/ town district	2	2	3	3	2

Source: author's interpretations

Legend: 1 – I strongly disagree; 2 – I disagree; 3 – I neither agree nor disagree; 4 – I agree; 5 – I strongly agree.

As was previously stated, sub-municipal self-government in Croatia does not possess any significant legally defined competence. It is therefore frequently considered an additional, and even unnecessary, level of governance. Local politicians, however, are those who can change this situation. By changing the statute, sub-municipal self-government might receive certain competence and finances. Chart 6 shows the distribution of answers regarding the statement that their ULG has no use of sub-municipal self-government. The results imply a similar distribution of answers to those from the previous statement. Executive officials strongly agree with the statement, presidents of town and municipal councils agree with it, whereas the council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts disagree. These differences in answers are statistically significant, especially those regarding councils and executive officials ( $p=0.000$ ) and those from presidents of town and municipal councils and executive officials ( $p=0.04$ ). The regression analysis determined that executive officials express a statistically significant difference in attitudes regarding the statement (1.96;  $p=0.000$ ) when compared to the attitudes of council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts and presidents of town and municipal councils (0.73;  $p=0.04$ ).

*Chart 6* – Distribution of answers regarding the statement that citizens have no use of sub-municipal self-government



Source: author's interpretations

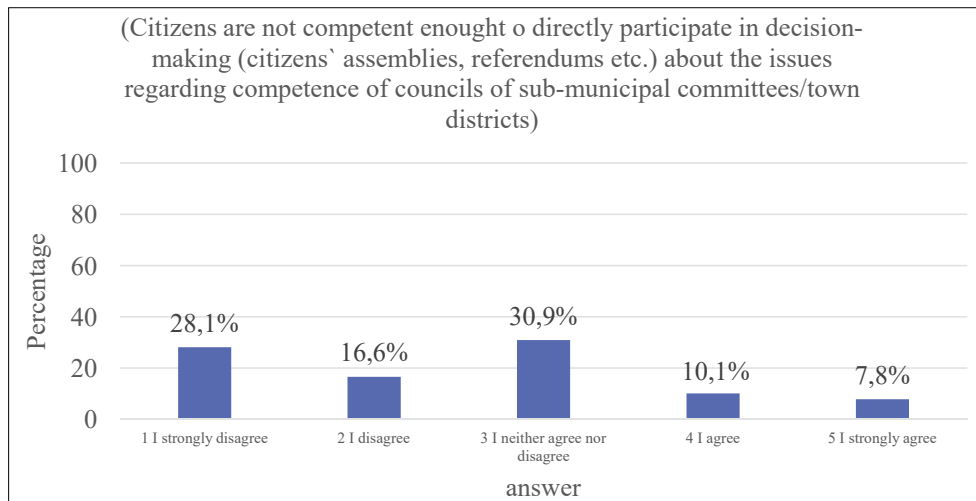
In addition, statistically significant differences were discovered in the answers of the respondents residing in towns and those coming from municipalities. Respondents whose ULG is a town disagree with the statement, while those coming from municipalities neither agree nor disagree ( $p=0.02$ ). The attitude of the respondents where most of them strongly disagree with the statement that citizens of a ULG have no use from councils of sub-municipal committees/town districts expresses a statistically significant positive weak correlation with the political party they support ( $\tau_b=0.16$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). Most of the respondents are supporters of the Croatian Democratic Union, which can be a reason of such distribution of answers.

The patronizing attitude of local political officials towards citizens as participants of local decision-making was mentioned previously in this paper. The respondents were thus offered a statement claiming that citizens are not competent enough to participate in the decision-making processes, and the distribution of answers regarding this statement is shown in Chart 7. Most of the respondents neither agree nor disagree with it, while 44,70% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree. This is the only statement which expresses statistically significant difference based on the gender of the respondents ( $p=0.04$ ). Male respondents disagree with the statement, while female respondents neither agree nor disagree with it. The regression analysis shows that executive officials express a statistically significant difference in attitudes (0.79;  $p=0.04$ ) in comparison to the attitudes of council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts. However, both groups mostly stated they neither agree nor disagree with the mentioned statement. The



attitudes expressed by presidents of town/ municipal council have no statistical significance on the answers regarding the statement 26 ( $p=0.89$ ).

*Chart 7* – Distribution of respondents` answers regarding the statement that citizens are not competent enough to directly participate in decision-making

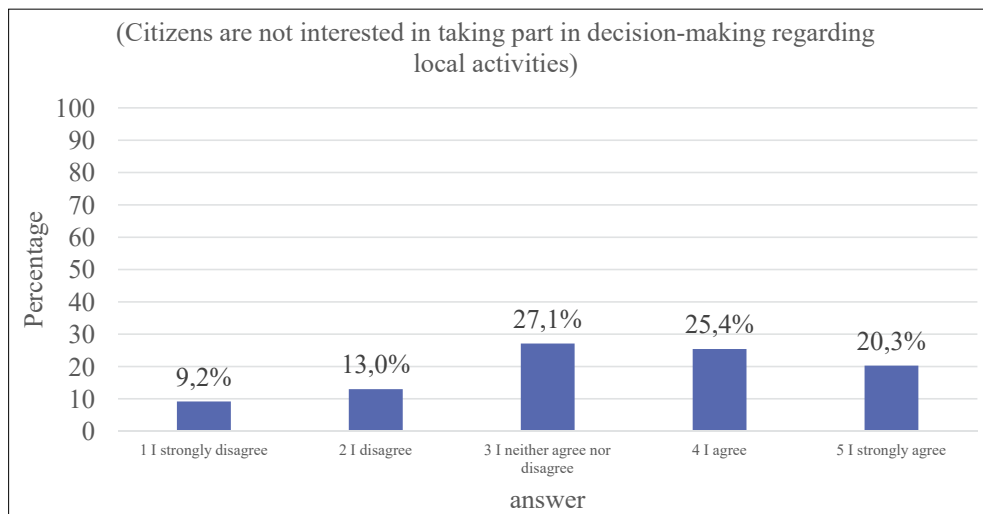


Source: author`s interpretations

Another common stereotype in political life is that the citizens lack interest and do not wish to participate at all. This argument is frequently used precisely by politicians, which was the reason why the statement regarding the personal attitudes and opinions of the respondents about the level of citizens` interest in political decision-making was included in the questionnaire.

Distribution of answers is shown in Chart 8 and indicates that most of the respondents are indifferent to this statement (neither agree nor disagree), while 45,70% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with it. This result can also be illustrated in a different way: only 22,2% of the respondents disagree with the statement. In addition, this is the only statement which shows no statistically significant differences or correlations between individual categories of participants.

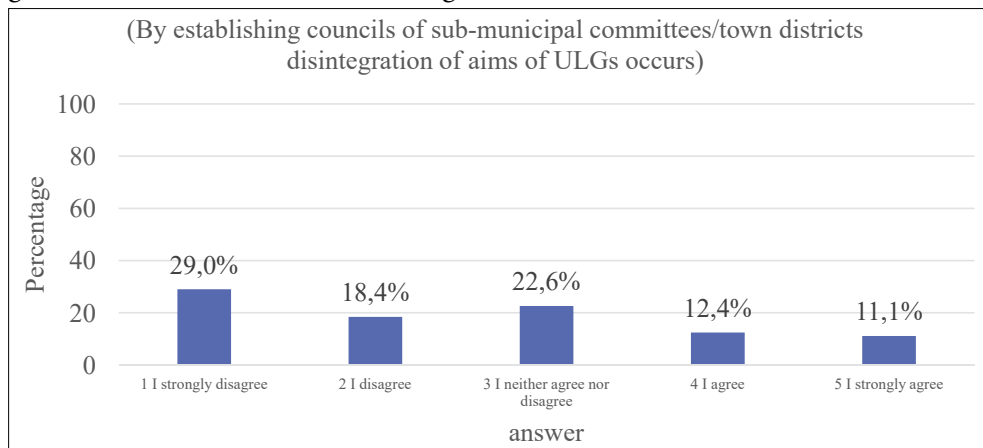
*Chart 8* – Distribution of answers regarding the statement about lack of citizens' interest



Source: author's interpretations

It has previously been mentioned that there are certain objections to how internal decentralization leads to disintegration of governance within the ULGs. Another level of authority is being implemented, the focus on sub-municipal bodies is partly the centre of interest, a proportion of financial means from the total budget is being allocated to ULGs, all of which can sometimes result in negative effects. Chart 9 illustrates the distribution of answers regarding the statement that by establishing sub-municipal bodies, the aims of the ULGs are being divided. As is evident, most of the respondents disagree with this statement. However, statistically significant differences were noticed referring to the attitudes of executive officials and council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts about this statement ( $p=0.01$ ), in addition to statistically significant weak and negative correlation between the answers and the function of the respondents ( $\tau b=-0.15$ ). Executive officials mostly agree with this statement, presidents of town and municipal council neither agree nor disagree, whereas council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts mostly disagree with it. The regression analysis shows that executive officials express a statistically significant difference in attitudes ( $1.05$ ;  $p=0.007$ ) regarding this statement when compared to the attitudes of council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts. They mainly agree with the statement unlike council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts, who disagree with it. There is no statistical significance if the respondents obtain the function of presidents of town/municipal council when it comes to this statement ( $p=0.59$ ).

*Chart 9* – Distribution of answers regarding the statement that sub-municipal self-government is an element of disintegration of ULGs



Source: author's interpretations

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After having presented the analysis of the research results, several conclusions can be drawn. Had the analysis of the answers of the respondents with the aim of testing the hypothesis been conducted only by descriptive statistics, the research results would not have been entirely correct. The fact that the number of respondents in individual categories is not the same significantly disrupts the results of descriptive analysis. The number of respondents in the category council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts is several times higher than the number of respondents in the other two categories. The results of the descriptive statistics thus show that the hypothesis (H1 - Local politicians do not support sub-municipal decentralization) is not confirmed. Most of the respondents (council members of sub-municipal committees/town districts) find the sub-municipal self-government necessary and useful for citizens and that it does not lead to disintegration of ULGs. Moreover, they think citizens are not incompetent to participate in decision-making while a significant part of them also believe they are willing and eager to take part in the decision-making processes. There is a logical explanation for these results: council members believe in their work, find themselves useful and will therefore not express any attitudes which can be harmful to them (possibly lead to cancelling of sub-municipal self-government). The results obtained by descriptive statistics for the purposes of testing the hypothesis should not be entirely trusted. However, these results are not useless, they simply need to be interpreted together with the statistically significant correlation determined between the answers to statement about the necessity and usefulness of

sub-municipal self-government (Charts 5 and 6) and political orientation of the respondents. Since most of the respondents (from all three categories) support the Croatian Democratic Union, sub-municipal councillors could and should encourage the strengthening of the role of sub-municipal self-government among their colleagues from the political party by asking for more competence and finances for the activities and work of sub-municipal bodies. The same political orientation might be used as a means for strengthening the role of sub-municipal self-government while simultaneously strengthening the role of citizens in local decision-making.

Further statistical analysis of the obtained answers established statistically significant differences among the attitudes of the respondents from different categories, as well as statistically significant correlation of the answers with the political function of the respondents. There are statistically significant differences present in all five statements, whereby executive officials have diametrically opposite (negative) attitudes compared with the attitudes of sub-municipal councillors. The attitudes of presidents of representative bodies are also statistically different from the attitudes of the other two categories but are approximately in the middle between positive and negative attitude. The difference in attitudes of individual categories is most obvious when the results are expressed by median (Table 2). Even the statement about the competence of citizens for involvement (the median of the answer is 3) expresses a statistically significant difference, which means that executive officials support the statement, while sub-municipal councillors disagree with it.

Statistically significant differences in attitudes are also found in connection with different types of ULGs the respondents come from. The respondents from towns express more positive attitudes of usefulness and significance of sub-municipal self-government when compared to the attitudes of respondents coming from municipalities. This can be explained by the fact that towns are in general larger units with more residents so the necessity for internal decentralisation is there greater.

Considering the extremely negative attitude of executive officials towards sub-municipal self-government and citizen involvement (sub-municipal self-government is unnecessary, citizens have no use of it, it leads to disintegration of ULGs, citizens are not competent for or interested in decision-making) and the prevailing negative attitude of the presidents of representative bodies regarding the same statements, it can be concluded that the hypothesis (H1 - Local politicians do not support sub-municipal decentralization) is confirmed for these two categories of respondents. An additional argument for supporting the hypothesis is provided by the data regarding the rapid decrease of the number of ULGs with established

sub-municipal self-government. Executive officials and presidents of local representative bodies are precisely those who decide about these matters.

Even though the results of the research are limited to Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties, they specify a particular behavioural pattern of local officials and can be used as a foundation for a more far-reaching research. The Republic of Croatia accepted the European Charter of Local Self-Government and all its principles, including the principle of subsidiarity and involvement of citizens in decision-making. It is therefore necessary to take certain measures through which the local political officials would be educated and made aware of the significance, well-being and necessity of real acceptance of the principle of involvement of citizens in decision-making. Adequate normative solutions would prove effective in strengthening the role of sub-municipal self-government and starting an intense campaign for active citizens' involvement as a necessary prerequisite for a more democratic, efficient and quality local decision-making. Promotional activities should be focused on all the levels of authority, including citizens themselves. It is necessary to present the positive effects of citizens' involvement in decision-making on local levels clearly and unambiguously. Conclusively, the paradigm of citizens' involvement should be accepted as a key prerequisite for strengthening democracy, openness and transparency of local self-government and a guarantee for a better future.

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