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# Editorial: Local government in central and eastern Europe: current trends and challenges

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Local government in central and eastern Europe: current trends and challenges

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, local governments across Europe have been confronted with increasingly complex challenges. These have manifested themselves in three main dimensions: austerity measures resulting from the 2008 financial crisis, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing need for transparent, inclusive, and data-driven policymaking facilitated by social media and digital governance. The situation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is particularly complicated due to the diversity of local governance systems and is often analyzed through a simplistic post-communist lens, leading to a lack of nuanced understanding both in academic discourse and among policymakers.

This Research Topic aims to explore how local authorities in CEE countries have responded to these challenges over the last decade and to assess the effectiveness of the tools at their disposal. The collection of articles within this edition reflects five key themes: (1) local government reform and restructuring, (2) local-regional-central government dynamics, (3) comparative successes and failures in addressing new challenges, (4) policy learning opportunities within CEE, and (5) citizen engagement in governance.

The first contribution by [Mexhuani](#) examines Kosovo's prospects for EU accession and highlighting both opportunities and persistent obstacles. Through a comparative analysis of EU engagement in Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries, this article highlights the paradox of EU-driven democratization efforts in a country facing both internal governance struggles and external legitimacy concerns. While EU assistance has fostered institutional development, non-recognition by some EU member states remains a major obstacle to Kosovo's integration process.

In another study, [Lipi et al.](#) investigate the free-rider problem in local governance and the provision of public goods in Albania. Using the municipality of Vlora as a case study, the authors examine how the limited financial literacy and political disengagement of citizens contribute to inefficiencies in distributions of public goods. This article underscores the critical need for improved civic education and municipal fiscal responsibility to mitigate the negative effects of underfunded local services.

Gasparyan shifts the focus to Armenia, where amalgamation reforms have transformed the administrative landscape. The study analyzes the impact of these reforms on local governance workloads and the role of digital governance as a mitigation strategy. It finds that while smaller communities benefited from increased government support, larger communities faced challenges related to workload distribution, service equity and local identity. This contribution adds to the growing discourse on whether digitalization can effectively offset the administrative burdens imposed by municipal restructuring.

Economic development strategies also play a central role in this edition, as explored by Kozma et al. Their study on Debrecen, Hungary, illustrates how a medium-sized city on the European periphery can strategically position itself as an economic hub. The research highlights the interaction between local economic planning, decentralization and competitiveness in the broader context of European economic integration. It offers valuable insights into policy measures that can enhance regional development outside the traditional metropolitan centers.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate the diversity of policy approaches, successes and setbacks in the CEE countries. They highlight the interplay of institutional reforms, digital transformation, fiscal challenges and citizen engagement and offer valuable lessons for policymakers and scholars alike. The findings of this Research Topic not only contribute to a better understanding of governance dynamics in CEE but also provide actionable insights to strengthen democratic practices, fostering economic resilience and improve public service delivery in the face of evolving challenges.

As editors, we hope that this collection will foster further interdisciplinary research and policy discussions on the future of local governance in the region. The complexity of local administration in CEE requires continued scholarly attention and policy innovation to ensure that municipalities can effectively serve their citizens while adapting to broader socio-economic transformations. In particular, we would like to suggest future studies (1) on the multi-level governance approach. With a clear delineation of responsibilities and sufficient capacity, it can contribute significantly to a more robust governance framework. Specific attention should be given to (2) digital governance. While the digitalization of administrative processes and service delivery has streamlined operations and enhanced transparency, it also raises issues in terms of digital divide, cybersecurity and accessibility. The study by Gasparyan highlights these tensions and shows that while some communities have embraced e-governance tools effectively, others are struggling to implement them due to resource constraints and limited digital literacy. Studies should further consider (3) citizen participation. Contribution by Lipi et al., showcases how limited civic awareness of public finance

and governance can exacerbate free-rider problems and weaken the social contract between governments and citizens. In contrast, Kozma et al. illustrate how proactive economic development strategies, supported by local stakeholders can enhance community resilience and drive long-term prosperity.

The diversity of cases and approaches in this edition reinforces the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all model for local governance reform. Each municipality and region faces unique historical, political, and economic circumstances that shape its governance challenges and responses. By analyzing a range of case studies, this collection provides a valuable comparative perspective that helps identify best practices, transferable lessons, and context-specific strategies for enhancing governance effectiveness.

In conclusion, this Research Topic contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to unravel the complexities of local governance in CEE countries. It highlights the struggles of municipalities to navigate financial, administrative, and political constraints while showcasing innovative responses to contemporary governance challenges. We hope this edition serves as a catalyst for future research and sparks new discussions on governance resilience, policy adaptation and institutional learning in the region. The insights provided here underscore the critical role of local authorities in shaping the democratic and developmental trajectory of CEE countries and offer meaningful guidance to scholars, practitioners and policymakers alike.

## Author contributions

AG: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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