

# INTERPRETATION OF LOCAL POLITICAL CONFLICTS

**Václav Bubeníček, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Economics,  
Czech University of Life Sciences,**

**Kamýcká 129, 165 21 Prague 6 – Suchdol, e-mail: bubenicek@pef.czu.cz.**

**Michal Kubálek, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Economics,  
Czech University of Life Sciences,**

**Kamýcká 129, 165 21 Prague 6 – Suchdol, e-mail: kubalek@pef.czu.cz.**

**Abstract.** The article is a case study of the political process in small municipalities of the Czech Republic. The question of the existence and character of cleavages is investigated on three levels. On the example of one municipality, the premises of the politological theories involved in the function of political systems in Czech small municipalities, while being focused on conflict and its nature, are verified on the basis of quantitative data and qualitative research. The character of actors of the conflict in municipalities and collective legitimacy of disputes are then further investigated. The results of the study, which presents a gradually improving specification of the interpretation of the cleavage in municipalities, lead us to the question of the possibilities of applying individual theoretical approaches in a given, specific area of investigation.

**Keywords:** cleavage, conflict, local political system, plurality, small municipality, legitimacy.

## Introduction

Research into Czech communal politics focused on factors explaining the nature of local political systems is mainly aimed at the study of strategic systems. One of the first Czech politological studies focused exclusively on the possibility to analyse the static forms of local party systems – interpretation of election results (e.g. Hudák, Jüptner, Svoboda 2003; Balík 2003), the nature of local parties (Čmejrek 2003; Šaradín, Outlý 2004 and others), and the influence and construction of a communal election system (Outlý 2003; Bubeníček 2004). Current analyses also followed a number of sociological studies, which in examining the social aspects of the Czech local politics address the issue of political culture (e.g. Vajdová 1996; Vajdová, Kostecky 1997), social networks (Buštková 1999a, 1999b), attitudes of local politicians and their role in communal politics (Hanšpach 1992; Vajdová 1995; Illner 2001; Ryšavý 2009 and others), etc. They focus on the factors influencing not only the formats of municipal party systems, but also their mechanisms that define functional models of the political systems themselves (see Jüptner 2006: 111). This is essentially a study of communal coalitions (e.g. Jüptner 2001, 2004, 2006; Ryšavý 2006; Balík 2005b; 2008), the roles of local political elites (Ryšavý 2004, 2006; Kubálek 2006), the continuity of political representation (Čmejrek, Čopík 2009), about the problem of political participation (Čmejrek 2005, 2008), voting behaviour (Kopřiva 2006), local democracy (Illner 2006; Valeš 2007; Bubeníček 2010; Čmejrek, Bubeníček, Čopík 2010), or the nature of the Czech municipal politics as a whole (Čmejrek 2008; Balík 2009).

The political environment of Czech small municipalities is mainly characterized by instability of the local party systems or even the absence of any local party structures (see e.g. Jüptner 2006; Balík 2008; Čmejrek 2003; Bubeníček 2010). From the given fact arises a complicated comprehension of the most common research subject - interpretation of the communal election results – this also tends to be the reason why small municipalities often do not become the subject of research exploration. Among other things, this may be a consequence of occasional tendencies to simplify the research of communal politics of small municipalities in the Czech Republic, as described by Stanislav Balík: *"It makes no sense to examine small municipalities precisely because of their smallness, from which mainly arises the personal nature of local politics, which is in fact not politics, but common care for the development of municipalities without a political context ..."* (Balík 2008: 7). Generally, it is therefore assumed that the local government of a small municipality consists mainly of a kind of “maintenance” activities (see Jüptner 2001: 156), but this may contest the very essence of political nature of communal politics (see Balík 2005a: 163). The author of the above quotation refuses the general argument of the apoliticalness of communal politics (see Balík 2009: 217-218), but with the exception of very small municipalities, which, as he says, *"... even if they wanted to, they do not have enough funds to fulfil the expectations of their citizens and representatives"* (Balík 2009: 219), and he suggests that the politological research of Czech small municipalities focuses rather on exploring local *policy* (Balík 2008: 7-8), although he does add that the given assertion, in view of the number of small municipalities, may be far too general, and unfair toward the given type of municipality (Balík 2008: 7). It is perhaps because small municipalities actually make up the majority of the total number of Czech municipalities that researching them makes sense - so not because of their small size, but mainly because of their frequent occurrence. Understanding local political phenomena in small municipalities can help with a more comprehensive understanding of the municipal political environment in the Czech Republic as a whole.

Additionally, if we start from a three-dimensional concept of politics as *policy* implementation through *politics* based on *polity* (see e.g. Fiala, Schubert 2000: 19), then even the decision-making of local communities represented by local political institutions (*polity*) on the future development of municipalities (*policy*) must have a legitimate political dimension (i.e. *politics*). Otherwise, we could argue the necessity of the very existence of local government decision-making bodies. Not all small municipalities are faced with a lack of enough funding, and if so, then a decision on the allocation of even the minimum funds can have significant political nature.

The concept of a Czech communal political environment as an environment free of political content is in many cases erroneous (see Bubeníček 2010), although the specifics of individual functional models of local political systems of small municipalities are so different from the political environments of large cities that their research requires a certain adaptation of established methodological procedures of researching political phenomena and commonly applied political theories that cannot be mechanically transferred on the local level.

The importance of exploring local politics also consists of the possibility of verifying the methodological and theoretical approaches used when studying national political process. At the same time, we can also encounter cases where political actors at the local level use tactical methods of conduct which they retroactively apply on a central level. For this reason, the study can be regarded as suggestive in terms of small municipalities. The submitted contribution thus represents an additional topic into the discussions concerning the possibility of the exploration and interpretation of political phenomena - in the given case of political conflicts – on the lowest political level.

## **Research Methods**

Possible alternatives of conflict research in small municipalities can be demonstrated using the analysis of the political environment of the municipality of Doubice (Děčín district) (Bubeníček, Kubálek 2010), which, with its 105 inhabitants (2010) is among the smallest municipalities in the Ústí nad Labem Region.

The basic aim of this case study of the small municipality was to explore and interpret the local cleavage and its implications. The study was based on long-term research, and the argument and solution branches out into three levels. The purpose of this step was to show how different theoretical and methodological approaches used in studies of communal policy processes can contribute to the eventual refinement of conclusions, and also verify these approaches in a case study.

On the first level, this research of Doubice was perceived as an instrumental case study. The aim was to evaluate the use of certain existing theories of the communal political process, as they were presented in various relevant studies in recent years (Balík 2008, 2009; Jüptner 2004; Ryšavý 2006; Čmejrek, Bubeníček, Čopík 2010 and others), which in their majority use the theoretical concept of researching politics on a national scale. In the given case, the resulting conflicts in terms of the impact of individual interests in the local political process were examined. On this level, the basic socio-demographic and electoral data of monitored community was utilized.

It was an instrumental case study on the second level as well. Here, however, the used and evaluated concept is the theory of Václav Bubeníček on the predominant nature of the cleavage specifically in small municipalities (Bubeníček 2010). Basic data was also used here, but also the results of previous studies, which were based primarily on a semi-structured series of interviews with representatives of local election parties in the periods around the individual communal elections.

The third level constituted a unique case study. It was based on an analysis of the discourse in semi-controlled interviews that were essentially carried out using an accepting interview method (see Kaufman 2010). The interviews were also aimed at identifying the main cleavage in the municipality, self-understanding and interpretation of the actors of the conflict and identification of potential group interests that are reflected in it. Selected respondents could be summarized with some exaggeration using the term "local notables" – these were the most active participants in local political and social life, but also informal authorities in the municipality.

### **Characteristics of a municipality**

Like other municipalities of the so-called Sudetenland, the removal of almost all the local German population in Doubice occurred after World War II. Before the end of the war, the population of the municipality numbered approximately 800 people. Three factories, several restaurants and small entrepreneurs operated in the municipality, and there was a school in the centre of the village. After the third removal of the German population in 1946 and the arrival of new residents (mainly from Dymokury near Poděbrady and Královice near Říčany) the population was approximately 400 persons (Doubice Municipal Chronicle 1945 - 2001). The two original factories gradually stopped operating (one became a local cinema) and a II. type co-operative was established in the municipality. Several organizations operated here which took care of local social life. In interviews, many residents of the epoch considered this the "golden age" of Doubice. A significant decline occurred in the municipality in 1975 when the last factory stopped being operated and the municipality came under the administration of the neighbouring city of Krásná Lípa. Approximately 110 permanent residents lived in the village at that time. In 1992, a local referendum was held on secession of the municipalities from Krásná Lípa in which 41 of a total of 47 voters in a ratio of 32 to 9 were in favour of restoring independence to Doubice, and this took place on January 1<sup>st</sup> of the following year (Doubice Municipal Chronicle 1945 - 2001). With 64 inhabitants, Doubice became the smallest independent municipality in the region. Due to its advantageous location on the border between two protected landscape areas and the Czech-Saxon

Switzerland National park, the economy of the municipality began to focus on tourism<sup>1</sup>. At present (2011), there are 6 restaurants, several apartment hotels and one hotel (in the building of the former elementary school). In addition to aforementioned, there are also 2 permanent food shops and several small businesses.

## **Results and Discussion**

The question of examining cleavage in small municipalities in the Czech Republic is, up to a considerable point, a question of the chosen theoretic and methodological approach. In this case the cleavages were examined using the example of the municipality of Doubice on three gradual levels. The first approach is based on one of the “traditional” theories of the communal political process which assume for small municipalities basically situation political conflicts arising mainly in matters concerning financing and related specific political interests. The case study of Doubice basically confirmed the validity of such an approach – political participation grew in the municipality during the periods of two significant conflicts, the first one concerning the sale of municipal land lots and, during the second stage in relation to the draft of the territorial plan. In the municipal election before which these matters emerged, it is possible to talk, from the viewpoint of the party system, about the very competitive nature of the local politics. However, certain presumptions are hidden in this approach, for example that the participants are rational, individual actors following their own interests. A certain smaller ability of the given theory to identify collective actors and to further analyse the political course of events during the periods of non-competition election results from the above. The approaches of the first level are therefore suitable above all for comparative studies, and to differentiate the municipalities with a standard competition-type party system from municipalities that require further examination (here, mainly smaller municipalities come in question).

On the second level of examination, the theory on the specific nature of the cleavage in small municipalities presume the existence of a long-time conflict between two visions of the future development of the municipality, or between the tendency to somehow petrify the local sociability, and between the effort to further develop the municipality, be it at the expense of more changes. Using this approach it was possible to identify collective actors of such dispute in Doubice

---

<sup>1</sup> Doubice was in the past referred to as a gateway to Czech-Saxon Switzerland and became a recreational resort which was recommended according to preserved documents as an ideal environment for people with nerve sickness, and so was earned the designation of the Brain Spa (Chmelík 1995), which is currently used by representatives of the municipality and operators of local recreational facilities as a major attribute in promoting the community.

(“locals” and “cottagers”), as well as its permanency. A certain presumption of the given theory is a rather strong tendency to prevent that conflict from crossing certain limits which could endanger the independence of the municipality or the basic “game rules” within which this conflict is running. It was possible to confirm the aforementioned presumption within the examination of the Doubice political process – despite the outlasting basic cleavage, compromises were reached in the cases when a certain individual actor represented such a danger. In general, it is possible to summarize that the aforementioned theory was validated in the case of Doubice as a potentially suitable instrument for further research of small municipalities.

On the third level, we speak of a unique case study of a small municipality. The aim was to ascertain how the local political process is understood by its actors themselves, and then to interpret the conflict through this self-understanding. The resulting findings deepen and up to a point exceed, but they mainly complement the conclusions acquired on the previous levels of examination. The existence of a significant cleavage identified on the second level was confirmed, but we have to state that this cleavage does not always culminate in an organizational expression (election party) and the respective political acting, but it often shows only on a special-interest or symbolic level. Therefore, it is not of the “cleavage” nature but it is on the other hand reflected by the participants as absolutely essential: due to this special nature, the authors propose to label the given cleavage as a “rupture” in the municipality of Doubice. Furthermore, the conclusions of the second level about the acceptability of situation compromises across the rupture were confirmed, but it is possible to complement them with another result of the examination – in general a less precise borderline between individual groups (actors of the conflict), as well as their internal structures so that some sub-groups (i.e. the “construction lobby”) can, at a certain moment, find themselves at the intersection” of collective actors. A specific finding is the fact that in addition to the clash of the vision of the further development, in the case of Doubice we have an even deeper and less recognizable conflict that is harder to recognize – a dispute asking “who is the real resident of the municipality” and who thus has the appropriate legitimacy to act on its behalf (related to collective actors regardless the specific composition of the local town council). The actors were able to develop remarkable legitimizing theories supporting their claims; these legitimizing stories in essence relate to the past of the municipality during the second half of the twentieth century but, at the same time, they can incorporate even parts (or at least expressions) of political narrations from the country-wide political arena. Therefore, it is possible to say that the rupture, in a simplified meaning, is also a clash of two communities, “two Doubices” projected into the past to secure for the collective actors exclusive legitimacy to act in the municipality itself and,

simultaneously, to provide a meaningful justification of their common past. It is apparent that this conflict could not have arisen if there were not a very individual and specific history which Doubice experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is also the reason why the local cleavage has the aforementioned form of a “rupture”.

## Conclusions

The article introduced one of the possible interpretations of local political conflicts on the example of a community study of one small village in the Czech Republic. An important result is a complex and ambiguous form of local cleavage which can be interpreted in different levels of generality. On the one hand it is possible to perceive this conflict as a clash of individual interests, on the other side the cleavage can be understood as a manifestation of deep-rooted conflict in the community based on the historical development of the municipality. The conclusion of the examination therefore emphasizes a certain importance of individual and specific examination of cleavage in individual small municipalities, and a certain caution when generalizing such findings.

## References

1. BALÍK, Stanislav (Ed.) (2003). *Komunální volby v České republice v roce 2002*. Brno: Mezinárodní politologický ústav Masarykovy university v Brně. ISBN 80-210-3211-1.
2. BALÍK, Stanislav (2005a). Metodologie výzkumu komunální politiky. In *Víceúrovňové vládnutí: teorie, přístupy, metody*. Eds.: Fiala, P.; Strmiska, M. Brno: ISPO FSS MU, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury. ISBN 80-7325-074-8.
3. BALÍK, Stanislav (2005b). Modely exekutivních koalic na komunální úrovni. In *Evropeizace. Nové téma politologického výzkumu*. Eds.: Dančák, B.; Fiala, P.; Hloušek, V. Brno: Mezinárodní politologický ústav Masarykovy university v Brně. ISBN 80-210-3865-9.
4. BALÍK, Stanislav (2008). *Česká komunální politika v obcích s rozšířenou působností. Koalice, voličské vzorce a politické strany na místní úrovni v letech 1994 – 2006*. Brno: CDK. ISBN 978-80-7325-144-4.
5. BALÍK, Stanislav (2009). *Komunální politika. Obce, aktéři a cíle místní politiky*. Praha: Grada. ISBN 978-80-247-2908-4.
6. BUBENÍČEK, Václav (2004). Komunální volební inženýrství. In *Sborník příspěvků z doktorandského semináře 2004*. Praha, February 17, 2004. Praha: PEF ČZU v Praze. ISBN 80-213-1150-9.
7. BUBENÍČEK, Václav (2010). *Lokální modely demokracie v malých obcích ČR*. Dissertation thesis. Praha: Katedra humanitních věd, Provozně ekonomická fakulta, Česká zemědělská univerzita v Praze.
8. BUBENÍČEK, Václav; KUBÁLEK, Michal (2010). Konfliktní linie v malých obcích. *Acta Politologica*, vol. 2, no. 3. ISSN 1803-8220.
9. BUŠŤÍKOVÁ, Lenka (1999a). Analýza sociálních sítí. *Sociologický časopis* 2/1999, ISSN 0038-0288, s. 193-206.
10. BUŠŤÍKOVÁ, Lenka (1999b). Známosti osobností lokální politiky. *Pracovní texty/Working Papers* 99:3. Praha: SOÚ AV ČR.
11. ČMEJREK, Jaroslav (2003). Lokální a regionální politické stranictví v ČR. In: *II. Kongres českých politologů*. Praha, September 5 – 6, 2003. Eds.: Dvořáková, V.; Heroutová, A. Praha: Česká společnost pro politické vědy. ISBN 80-902176-3-X.
12. ČMEJREK, Jaroslav (2005). Specifika komunální politiky v malých obcích ČR. In: *Evropeizace. Nové téma politologického výzkumu*. Eds.: Dančák, B.; Fiala, P.; Hloušek, V. Brno: Mezinárodní politologický ústav Masarykovy university v Brně. ISBN 80-210-3865 9.
13. ČMEJREK, Jaroslav (2008). *Obce a regiony jako politický prostor*. Praha: Nakladatelství Alfa. ISBN 978-80-87191-00-4.

14. ČMEJREK, Jaroslav; BUBENÍČEK, Václav; ČOPIK, Jan (2010). *Demokracie v lokálním politickém prostoru*. Praha: Grada Publishing. ISBN 978-80-247-3061-5.
15. ČMEJREK, Jaroslav; ČOPIK, Jan (2009). Kontinuita a diskontinuita ve vývoji lokální politické reprezentace. *Acta Politologica*, vol. 1, no. 3. ISSN 1803-8220.
16. FIALA, Petr; SCHUBERT, Klaus (2000). *Moderní analýza politiky. Uvedení do teorií a metod policy analysis*. Brno: Barrister & Principal. ISBN 80-85947-50-1.
17. HANŠPACH, Dan (1992). Sociální a politický profil místních politiků. *Data & Fakta 16*. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR.
18. HUDÁK, Jakub; JÜPTNER, Petr; SVOBODA, Jiří (Eds.) (2003). *Komunální politické systémy*. Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy. ISBN 80-7308-056-7.
19. CHMELÍK, Otto (1995). *Doubice – pokus o historický obraz části českokamenického panství*. Bachelor thesis. Ústí nad Labem: PedF UJEP.
20. ILLNER, Michal (2001). Formování lokálních mocenských elit se zvláštním zřetelem na úlohu starostů. In Mojmír Hampl et al. *Regionální vývoj: specifika české transformace, evropská integrace a obecná teorie*. Praha: PFF UK, Katedra sociální geografie a regionálního rozvoje, s. 251–274.
21. ILLNER, Michal (2006). Velikost obcí, efektivita jejich správy a lokální demokracie. In: *Autonomie a spolupráce: důsledky ustavení obecního zřízení po roce 1990*. Eds.: Vajdová, Z.; Čermák, D.; Illner, M. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR. ISBN 80-7330-086-9.
22. JÜPTNER, Petr (2001). Komunální koalice a politické modely. *Politologická revue 2001/2*. ISSN 1211-0353.
23. JÜPTNER, Petr (2004). Komunální koalice a politické modely. *Politologická revue 2004/2*. ISSN 1211-0353.
24. JÜPTNER, Petr (2006). Konfrontace teorie koalic s lokální politikou. In *Koalice a koaliční vztahy*. Ed.: Cabada, L. Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk. ISBN 80-7380-004-7.
25. KAUFMAN, Jean-Claude (2010). *Chápající rozhovor*. Praha: SLON. ISBN 978-80-7419-033-9.
26. KOPŘIVA, Radek (2006). Možnosti aplikace modelů stranické identifikace v podmínkách lokálního politického procesu. In: *III. Kongres českých politologů*. Eds.: Němec, J.; Šuštková, M. Praha, Olomouc: Česká společnost pro politické vědy. ISBN 978-80-902176-0-7.
27. KUBÁLEK, Michal (2006). Legitimita lokálních politických institucí. In: *III. Kongres českých politologů*. Eds.: Němec, J.; Šuštková, M. Praha, Olomouc: Česká společnost pro politické vědy. ISBN 978-80-902176-0-7.
28. OUTLÝ, Jan (2003). Volby do zastupitelstev – vývoj a souvislosti. *Politologická revue 2003/2*. ISSN 1211-0353.
29. RYŠAVÝ, Dan (2004). Proměny lokálních politických elit na venkově a malém městě – vstupní rozvaha. In *Česko-slovenské sociologické dny*. Ed.: Škodová, M. Praha: SOÚ AV ČR. ISBN 80-7330-068-0.
30. RYŠAVÝ, Dan (2006). Komunální je komunální a velká je velká! K hypotéze politizace lokálních politických elit. *Sociologický časopis 5/2006*. ISSN 0038-0288.
31. RYŠAVÝ, Dan (2009). Čeští lokální politici 20 let po tranzici. in Ladislav Cabada, Helena Hricová (eds.). *IV. Kongres českých politologů*, Plzeň, September 9–10, Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita v Plzni, s. 159–173.
32. ŠARADÍN, Pavel; OUTLÝ, Jan (Eds.) (2004). *Studie o volbách do zastupitelstev v obcích*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci. ISBN 80-244-0798-1.
33. VAJDOVÁ, Zdenka (1995). Postoje k lokální politice. *Data & Fakta č. 9*. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR.
34. VAJDOVÁ, Zdenka (1996). Politická kultura – teoretický koncept a výzkum. *Sociologický časopis*, Vol. 32, 3/1996. ISSN 0038-0288.
35. VAJDOVÁ, Zdenka; KOSTELECKÝ, Tomáš (1997) Politická kultura lokálních společenství: případ tří měst. *Sociologický časopis*, Vol. 32, 3/1997. ISSN 0038-0288, s. 445-465.
36. VALEŠ, Lukáš (2007). *Zrod demokratických politických systémů okresů Klatovy, Domažlice a Tachov a jejich vývoj v 90. letech 20. století*. Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk. ISBN 978-80-7380-082-6.