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European Label of Governance Excellence

Final Report

Delivering Good Governance
in Slovakia

2021



CENTRE OF EXPERTISE
FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE



ISIG



DOBRY
ÚRADNÍK

Acknowledgements

Dobry úradník (Good Civil Servant) is an accredited partner of the Council of Europe participating in the implementation of the project “Delivering Good Governance in Slovakia”, the aim of which is to support Slovak municipalities to improve their performance and provide high quality services in an improved system of local self-government. Its task was to implement the [Council of Europe Center of Expertise](#) tool European Label of Governance Excellence (ELOGE) and deliver the programme in Slovakia in order to award the Label to local authorities that achieve an overall high score in good governance based on a benchmark evaluating their performance in relation to the twelve Principles of Good Democratic Governance, which the Council of Europe facilitates in several countries.

This unique opportunity and, at the same time, a challenge to assess one's own potential identifies hidden challenges but also offers a learning opportunity under the supervision of foreign as well as domestic experts. It leads local governments not only through identifying their strengths and weaknesses, but thanks to mentoring and know-how available through international experience, it also allows their performance to ascend towards higher quality.

Despite the difficulties with implementing the 2020 pilot year of ELOGE in Slovakia during the global COVID-19 pandemic, our cooperation resulted in a successful finale. However, we certainly do not consider the project finished; we firmly believe that the implementation of ELOGE and our cooperation with all stakeholders will continue in 2021. We'd like to express a strong belief that further cooperation will also involve personal meetings and that the situation will allow us to fulfill the mission of Dobry úradník and the ELOGE programme itself through live encounters.

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1. Introduction

The European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE) is awarded to local authorities for having achieved a high level of good governance according to Council of Europe's [12 Principles of good democratic governance](#). The assessment process consists of participating authorities' self-assessment, citizen as well as elected officials' survey and providing evidence in order to justify the claimed self-assessment. Thereby, local authorities demonstrate that their governance is in accordance with the law and, in general terms, in the best interest of citizens of the respective local authority.

1.1. The twelve Principles

The twelve Principles of Good Democratic Governance are to be developed as reference points to define and evaluate the level of democratisation and good local governance.

1. Participation, Representation and Fair Conduct of Elections
2. Responsiveness
3. Efficiency and Effectiveness
4. Openness and Transparency
5. Rule of Law
6. Ethical conduct
7. Competency and Capacity
8. Innovation and Openness to Change
9. Sustainability and Long-term Orientation
10. Sound Financial Management
11. Human rights, Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion
12. Accountability

2. ELoGE in Slovakia

In March 2020, the NGO Dobrý úradník ([website](#)) was accredited by the Council of Europe to implement ELoGE in Slovakia. Council of Europe experts from the Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia ([website](#)) provided support to the project and municipalities applying for the label (The terms *municipality* and *local administration* are used interchangeably throughout this document, even though, strictly taken, the term *municipality* is more exact when talking about the 2020 run of the programme.). As an independent research institution accredited by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research and facilitating the implementation of ELoGE on behalf of the Council of Europe, it provided great assistance during the whole process, and trained local experts who became skilled at the implementation of the ELoGE tool.

The training of local experts marked the start of the programme implementation in May and June 2020. Representatives from relevant institutions were approached in order to form the National Stakeholders' Platform which helped Dobrý úradník to adapt the benchmark after the Memorandum on cooperation ([link](#)) was signed (2.2). The official launch of the cooperation with the municipalities (i.e. launch of the self-assessment) took place in September, followed by collection of citizens' and elected representatives' opinions on the performance of their respective municipality throughout October and November. The collected data were evaluated in December 2020 and the results were shared for consultation with the National Stakeholders' Platform in mid-January 2021. The Awards ceremony took place on January 28, 2021 via videoconference.



What made the pilot project in Slovakia specific was the fact that it entirely took place during the COVID-19 pandemic – from expert trainings to official project launch, also from working with local authorities to the Awards ceremony. This unfortunate turn of events influenced the whole mode of cooperation between the project team and the local authorities. More on 2020 specifics in chapter [2.4](#).

2.1. Dobrý úradník

The Slovak NGO Dobrý úradník (Good Civil Servant) was established in 2018 by a group of civil servants enthusiastic to support and promote a culture of professional, ethical and innovative civil service as well as a transparent state. The association supports networking among civil servants and their peers and encourages education, mainly via live and on-line discussions, active participation in social events and, also, writing about relevant topics. In addition, it also focuses on raising awareness of the general public concerning the importance of civil service, cooperates with a wide range of stakeholders from NGOs to universities and promotes its 10 Principles of a Good Civil Servant.

2.2. National Stakeholders' Platform

The National Stakeholders' Platform including public institutions and civic associations was assembled in order to create the Slovak ELoGE benchmark, supervise the implementation of the programme, thereby ensuring that best performing municipalities receive the ELoGE. It comprises of the representatives from two ministries, one national supervisory body, one university and three associations connecting municipalities or their citizens.

- Ministry of Finance, Mr. Jozef Kubala
- Ministry of Interior, Mrs. Nad'a Kurilová
- Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Institute of Public Policy, Mrs. Lucia Mokr'á
- Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic, Mr. Ľubomír Andrassy
- Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia, Mrs. Jana Āerven'áková
- Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia, Mr. Radomír Brt'áň
- Association of Citizens of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia, Mr. Vladimír Šp'ánik

2.3. Participating municipalities

In August 2020, an open call for participation targeting Slovak municipalities was published, followed by approaching potential project participants on individual basis.

What needs to be emphasised is the fact that since this was the first, pilot project, greater efforts were made towards setting up and testing the assessment system. Even though in this first year of piloting ELoGE the call was open to all municipalities and towns, Dobrý Úradník plans to open the programme in 2021 also for self-governing regions.

Municipalities that applied for the pilot project in 2020:

- Hlavné mesto Slovenskej republiky Bratislava (Bratislava, the Capital of Slovakia, a separate administrative district with distinct competencies, but encompassing all its boroughs)
- Bratislava-Staré Mesto (Bratislava-Old Town, a Bratislava borough)
- Bratislava-Rača (a Bratislava borough)
- Dubnica nad Váhom
- Handlová
- Hlohovec
- Kežmarok
- Sliač
- Topoľčany

2.4. 2020 specifics

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was a very specific year and its turn of events influenced the project immensely. Due to social distancing measures and (video) calls becoming generally the most preferred modus operandi, parts of the project such as project team meetings, expert consultations with the municipalities, National Stakeholders' Platform meeting or the Awards ceremony had to be organised online. This happened to be a distraction and a complication at the very beginning of the project, but became a rather standard form of human interaction throughout the course of the year.

However, the pandemic was a challenge to municipalities who had to change their standard ways of working and were suddenly overwhelmed with pandemic-related tasks. In some cases, this caused an immensely increased workload on their part and preventing the spread of the disease was prioritized over ELoGE.

The pandemic also influenced the means of communication between the project team and municipalities bringing both some complications, as well as unexpected benefits. Most contacts took place via weekly Zoom calls or to a lesser extent via telephone or e-mail. It can be safely assumed that these forms of communication were more time-efficient and effective than in-person meetings. Yet it should also be noted that in-person contact, including in-person visits to the assessed institutions would have helped deepen the experts' understanding of their characteristics, mind-sets, strategies and operations.

3. Methodology

The project implementation in Slovakia started with a localised version of the Benchmark document, which breaks down the principles of good democratic governance into more detailed activities with corresponding indicators that allow local authorities to self-evaluate their maturity in these fields. However, in the future, these indicators will need further optimisation (Recommendations for upcoming years & other countries) in order to better reflect national specifics and (this refers both to the content and language used) be more understandable for both local authorities' staff and the citizens.

A dominant tool extensively used throughout the project was Google Drive. It was utilised not only for hosting questionnaires for data collection, but also as a collaborative platform for sharing data and information, such as a *Frequently Asked Questions* document allowing the project team to provide prompt answers to participating municipalities' questions, as well as sharing relevant evidence or photo documentation from the project. The data collected through questionnaires was also available to the municipalities in real time.

3.1. Benchmark

Assessment of the participating municipalities against the Benchmark of the twelve principles of good democratic governance, allows to identify municipalities that best uphold the principles, rendering them eligible for the ELoGE label. Used for self-assessment, the Benchmark's indicators reflect on how a municipality's activity corresponds to the relevant principle and ought to be supported by evidence supplied by the local authority, such as existing regulations, internal documents, audits, but also information shared on web sites, mobile apps or through social media.

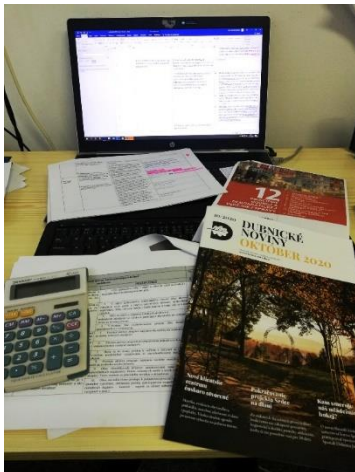
In relation to each indicator, a number of points can be awarded from 0 (does not apply) to 4, where 1 equals weak performance in known issues (that have not been dealt with so far) and 4 equals a track record of best practices. Based on these points, a mark for the whole principle, ranging from 0 to 4, is calculated as an arithmetic mean, and from these marks, again as an arithmetic mean, each municipality's final marks are calculated. Acquiring an average of three or more points per principle indicates that the qualities of that municipality shall qualify it as eligible for the ELoGE label. For self-assessment results, see chapter 5.1.

The summary maturity matrix, included in the Benchmark, shall help municipalities identify their strengths and weaknesses and therefore enable them to work on improving the latter whether the respective municipality is awarded the Label of Excellence or not.

4. Online data collection

Multiple ways of collecting citizen and elected officials' data were considered, including in-person surveys or an app for mobile platforms. However, after discussions and considering the (potential) cost-result ratio, web-based questionnaires, especially Google Forms, emerged as the most promising tool.

4.1. Promotion



In recent years Facebook became one of dominant channels utilised by the public administration in Slovakia for communication with the citizens. As other social media channels are spread rather throughout specific groups (Instagram is preferred by younger users, Twitter is rather marginal in the country), approximately half of Slovak citizens across all social strata have Facebook accounts. Therefore, Facebook became the main tool for communicating all project-related activities, including the survey, somehow naturally. In addition, ELoGE was also promoted via the Dobrý úradník website and via paper printed bi-weekly and website *Obecné noviny* (Municipal Newspaper) which covers municipalities in Slovakia.

Both participating municipalities and the project team communicated the project and surveys via their Facebook pages which can safely be assumed

the dominant source of survey responds. The other originally planned channel – personal contact – was assessed as not applicable due to the pandemic.

In addition to promoting the project through Facebook, some of the participating municipalities also promoted the survey collection using a QR code linked in their printed monthly newspaper linking to Google Forms, via local messaging services, etc.

4.2. Statistics: The demographic

The overall number of answers collected from the **general population** was 1013. The average age of respondents was 42 years old and living in their municipality for 29 years. 53.3 % of answers came from women, 46.6 % from men; 61.5 % respondents were university educated, 29.7 % had secondary vocational and 7.8 % had high school education.

Number of survey answers per municipality and statistical relevancy

Municipality	Number of citizens	Answers needed for statistical relevance	Answers collected	Statistical relevance saturation
Bratislava (Capital)	437 726	384	145	37.76 %
Bratislava-Staré Mesto	41 893	381	119	31.23 %
Bratislava-Rača	23 904	379	90	23.75 %
Dubnica nad Váhom	23 550	379	224	59.10 %
Hlohovec	21 301	378	103	27.25 %
Sliač	4 959	357	104	29.13 %
Topoľčany	24 785	379	196	51.72%

Only 61 out of 151 **elected officials** answered the survey, out of whom 67.7 % were men, their average age being 49 years and 81.7 % of them were university educated. 51.6 % of them were employed in the public sector. 50 % served their first term in the office (24.2 % second term and 25.8 % third or more) and 35.5 % were active as volunteers in their municipalities.

4.3. Surveys

Collecting data purely online was not the original plan. Some of the participating municipalities, such as Bratislava-Old Town, also intended to collect data via in-person survey. In this case, these were to be conducted at live public events in the municipality in the fall of 2020, such as city anniversary celebrations, carnivals, harvests etc. However, due to the pandemic-related restrictions on public gatherings, these events were initially postponed only to be later definitely cancelled.

Another option assessed was to utilise a dedicated mobile app, yet its probable contribution to the project was evaluated as not offering a meaningful cost/benefit ratio. The contribution of Google Forms questionnaires was expected to have more impact with zero costs.

5. Self-assessment

As the number of citizens' survey answers didn't reach a statistically relevant amount in any participating municipality, it was decided to assess municipalities mainly based on their self-evaluation and to use the answers collected from the citizens as supporting evidence. It shall be noted that the municipalities showed more self-criticism than their citizens and awarded themselves less points in the respective categories in the benchmark compared to the citizen survey.

5.1. Municipalities' performance

Self-assessment results (rounded to the nearest whole number) and final marks. More in chapter 3.1.

Principle	Bratislava (Capital)	Bratislava–Staré Mesto	Bratislava-Rača	Dubnica nad Váhom	Hlohovec	Topoľčany	Avg. mark per principle
1. Participation, Representation, Fair Conduct of Elections	3	3	2	3	4	4	3
2. Responsiveness	3	4	2	3	4	4	3
3. Efficiency and Effectiveness	3	3	2	3	3	3	3
4. Openness and Transparency	4	4	3	4	4	4	4
5. Rule of Law	4	4	3	3	4	4	4
6. Ethical Conduct	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
7. Competency and Capacity	3	2	2	3	3	3	3
8. Innovation and Openness to Change	4	4	2	4	4	4	4
9. Sustainability and Long-term Orientation	4	4	2	3	4	3	3
10. Sound Financial Management	3	4	3	3	4	4	3
11. Human Rights, Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion	3	4	2	3	3	4	3
12. Accountability	3	4	3	3	4	3	3
Avg. mark per municipality	3.47	3.49	2.49	3.28	3.53	3.51	

6. Conclusions

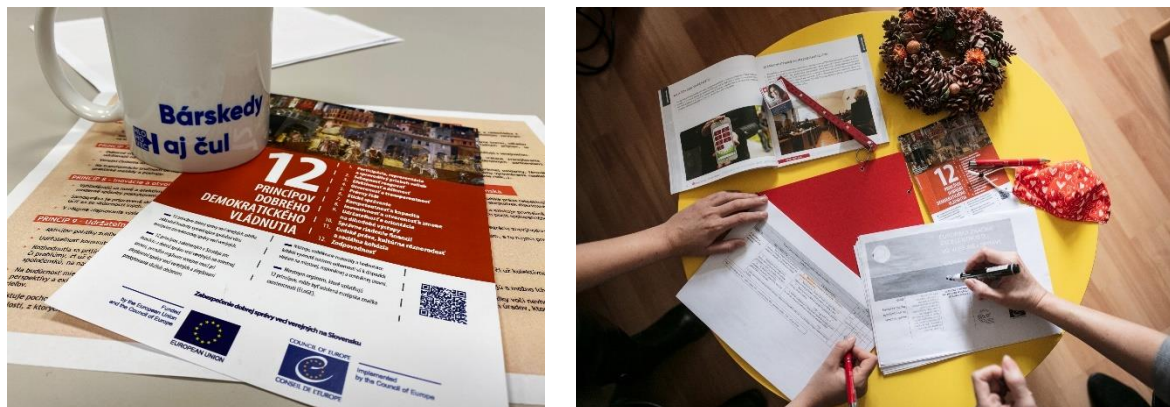
Out of nine participating municipalities, six managed to finish the pilot project and five of them acquired enough points to qualify for the ELoGE award:

- Hlavné mesto Slovenskej republiky Bratislava (Capital of Slovakia)
- Bratislava-Staré Mesto
- Dubnica nad Váhom
- Hlohovec
- Topoľčany

Bratislava-Rača received the score of 2.49. The towns of Handlová and Kežmarok left shortly after the Launch in September 2020, Sliač collected the citizens' and elected representatives' data, however, didn't manage to complete the self-evaluation on time. According to the information available to the project team, complications caused by the pandemic were to blame, at least to some extent. The project team believes

that these municipalities might have the predispositions necessary to qualify for the ELoGE label, therefore they shall be encouraged to participate in the project in 2021.

6.1. Findings on individual municipalities



With each municipality, we've identified activities or projects that make them stand out among the crowd – changes they were among the first to implement, activities that could serve as a showcase to motivate and inspire other municipalities in order to improve their services and operations.

Hlavné mesto Slovenskej republiky Bratislava (Bratislava, Capital of Slovakia)

- Unlike most Slovak municipalities, it has been almost two decades since Bratislava first introduced its front office as a novelty in the era when it was common that municipal employees received clients in their individual offices. This also contributed to the quality of established internal processes which the city spent years fine-tuning, including the usage of digital documents which is being currently introduced.
- The city recently established the Metropolitan Institute aimed at becoming the center point for architecture, urban and strategic planning and participatory development.
- Also, a municipal services corporation was established in order to provide more cost-efficient services, mainly road maintenance, which have been outsourced in the recent decades.
- The municipality runs the Open Data Bratislava website ([link](#)), which provides large amounts of machine-processable open data (such as maps or datasets) to both experts or the general public.
- The city actively engages disabled and marginalised citizens into decision making processes, aims at identifying their issues and cooperates with relevant NGOs.

Bratislava-Staré Mesto

- Recently, the municipality created a unit for strategy and project management which focuses on drafting strategic documents and data processing.
- The municipality also has its own social dispensary where food is distributed to socially disadvantaged citizens.
- The mayor holds regular monthly meetings with citizens, where plans are presented.
- The municipality uses a mobile application for informing citizens and encouraging interaction.
- All municipal assembly meetings are scheduled a year ahead and are live-streamed on-line.

Dubnica nad Váhom

- The municipality monitors local issues trending on social media and reflects these in policy concepts.

- A strategic management department was established in order to monitor local issues and draft solutions.
- Implemented electronic tools for measuring employee productivity.
- The town participates in the Slovak Smart City Cluster, granting it access to relevant know-how and experts.
- Citizens receive free composters, generally high level of waste sorting.

Hlohovec

- Extensive use of participatory development with significant decision-making voice given to citizens who will be using the public spaces concerned.
- In addition to live streams, the mayor has a two-hour window for meeting citizens on a weekly basis.
- Suppliers contracted through public procurement are demanded to adopt social aspects into their business, such as hiring socially disadvantaged employees or members of marginalised communities.
- The town has a strategy department which, among others, collects data and drafts background papers for decision making.
- Projects identifying climate-change risks and means of adapting for ongoing changes.

Topoľčany

- The town is working on digitising and publishing documents such as contracts or invoices.
- Also, a digital municipal assembly has been introduced.
- Concepts for implementing intelligent technologies are in place.
- A municipal low-carbon strategy has been designed.
- Municipal foundation focuses on supporting education.

6.2. Best practices

- Mobile applications which serve as a two-way communications channel: they not only give users access to information from their municipality but allow them to send feedback or suggestions the other way as well.
- On-line streams and archives of local assemblies (and other bodies) allow for even greater transparency than basic public access granted by law.
- Smart garbage cans are now trending and it is the right way to save both funds and natural resources (presumably). More similar steps, such as self-monitoring utilities infrastructure are only waiting to proliferate.
- Plan for the future, not for the past. Climate change is here and it will not suddenly disappear. Planning for anticipated changes is more efficient than coping with them later.

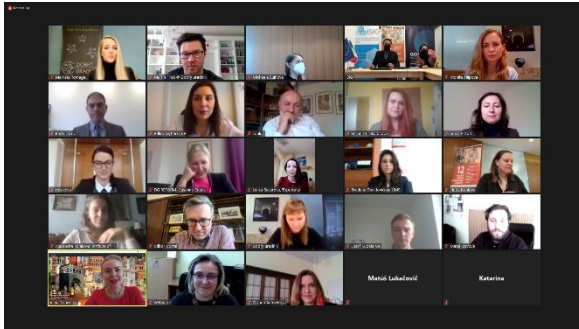
6.3. Recommendations for participating municipalities

1. (Participation, Representation and Fair Conduct of Elections)
 - Involvement of marginalised communities or actively motivating citizens to run for office is still a rather rare sight, but one worth challenging.
2. (Responsiveness)
 - Standardising and clarity of processes can be improved.

3. (Efficiency and Effectiveness)
 - Standardising a performance measurement framework as well as monitoring and sharing best practices among individual municipalities could help increase their efficiency and/or effectiveness.
4. (Openness and Transparency)
 - Room for improving data user-friendliness exists: many of the published materials are low-resolution scans where quality could be increased and full-text search possibilities, enabling automated data processing, could be introduced. Also, publishing open data and enabling access via an API is to be advised.
5. (Rule of Law)
 - Information on lawsuits that the municipality is a party to, could be published on-line.
6. (Ethical conduct)
 - Rigid rules for decision-making in manipulation-prone situations are encouraged, such as systematic defining of investment priorities.
7. (Competency and Capacity)
 - Relevance of trainings for individual employees shall be considered in order to support education that supports skills the municipality needs and eliminate those redundant.
8. (Innovation and Openness to Change)
 - We recommend taking effectiveness and efficiency into consideration when adapting innovative solutions.
 - Openness of the acquired systems is also to be considered when reasonable in order to curb future expansion or operations costs.
9. (Sustainability and Long-term Orientation)
 - We recommend a stronger focus on future impacts of climate change and planning solutions for adapting.
 - Also, with all municipal projects, we recommend examining energy efficiency of considered solutions and minimising both their energy consumption as well as carbon footprint.
10. (Sound Financial Management)
 - Sharing best practices with other municipalities (not only in finance-related issues) is encouraged.
 - Local levies and taxes could be communicated better, both the amounts to be paid as well as the reasoning behind them. Spending efficiency should be evaluated.
 - Municipal budget preparation processes should include a standardised, or institutionalised, approach to participatory development.
11. (Human rights, Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion)
 - Lack of data on which groups need special support should be addressed.
12. (Accountability)
 - We recommend allowing as much public scrutiny into municipal decisions as possible with all the processes and rules being easily understandable to the citizens.

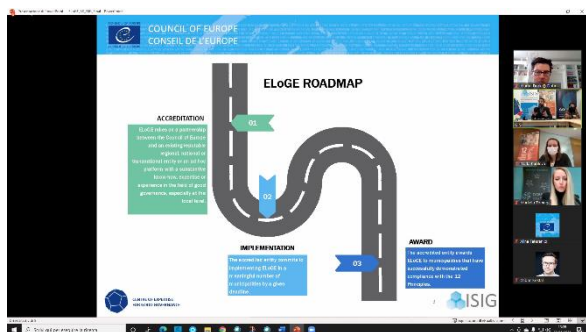
6.4. The Awards ceremony

The Awards ceremony took place in Bratislava's Hotel Bôrik and, as was so typical of the previous year, the turnout was strongly influenced by the raging pandemic.



Almost forty participants participated at the event, ranging from representatives of the Council of Europe and associated experts, the European Commission and the project team to the top tiers of participating municipalities, the National Stakeholders' Platform and the Slovak Minister of Interior. The event was also open for the wider public to join.

The event was, among others, joined by Mario Nava, Director General DG Reform of the European Commission; Roman Mikulec, Minister of Interior of the Slovak Republic; Sonia Sirtori, Head of the Democratic Governance Division, Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe; Susanne Caarls, Governance and Public Administration Reform & Country Coordinator, DG Reform of the European Commission; and Alina Tatarenko, Head of the Centre of Expertise for Good Governance, Democratic Governance Division of the Council of Europe.



Only a skeleton crew was physically present at the venue, while most of the participants watched and spoke on-line via the Zoom meeting platform. Even though the municipalities had some great posts on social media, due to the lack of physical presence, the media potential of a number of interesting guests meeting in one place was largely left untapped, even though not fully: both major Slovak press agencies, SITA ([link](#)) and TASR ([link](#)), and their associated outlets ([link](#)) informed about the event. Despite the slightly unfortunate setting, the on-line event was in addition joined by municipalities which did not participate in the pilot, but expressed their interest in joining the project in 2021.

A video from the event was also produced, intended as project promotion tool which can also showcase it in the upcoming years ([link](#)).

6.5. Recommendations for upcoming years & other countries

- i. When drafting communication aimed at the general public, consider the language. They might not understand professional lingo.
- ii. Re-evaluate the questions for citizens and elected representatives following the pilot and, following its findings, optimise them in order to better reflect local specifics.
- iii. Analyse the drop-out rate and consider prevention / retention measures.

- iv. Consider the ability of local administration to deal with external / global threats as one of the aspects of good governance.
- v. 2020 has shown us that some of the most difficult tasks, when dealing with global threats such as climate change and the pandemic, are up to municipalities and local administration in general. Swift reactions and flexibility are the keys to success, and we have to consider the possibility that this aspect of local administrations will gain on weight. Therefore, the ability to react to crisis situations could also be considered when evaluating good governance.
- vi. In order to increase efficiency, save time and funds, utilising on-line meetings and web-based collaborative platforms can only be encouraged.
- vii. The Slovak pilot year showed extensive interest by municipalities in networking and sharing knowledge with their peers not only throughout the country, but also with the rest of Europe and with municipalities which already had experience with ELoGE. Creating a Europe-wide forum, a platform for networking, could be interesting for future project participants as well as for the former ones.