

Decision Initiation and Suggestion Evaluation in Lithuanian Municipalities

Agota Giedre Raisiene

*Mykolas Romeris University
Ateities st. 20, LT-08303, Vilnius*

The article analyses main features of processes of political/administrative decision initiation and evaluation in Lithuanian municipalities.

Demand of development of decision-making process in municipalities was inspired by: a) decentralization; b) changes in the institutional structure of municipalities; c) economic/social partner and municipalities cooperation in making important to communities municipal decisions. The most relevant areas of decision-making improvement are analyzed using methods of sociological survey and organizational structure analyses. Results of the research shows that a great number of Lithuanian municipalities strives to ensure high quality of decision making and suggestion discussing. Nevertheless, it is very common for municipalities while reacting to the problems to thrust decisions, to form the policy and make decisions instead of arriving at consensus and decision planning.

Keywords: *local Government, Decision-making, Suggestion Initiation and Evaluation.*

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *savivaldos institucijos, sprendimų priėmimas, sprendimų iniciavimas ir vertinimas.*

Reforms of the public sector is an undergoing process in Lithuania, as well as in other Eastern Europe countries, aimed at reducing the Central Government's role and modernization of the public sector. It is especially noticeable in the sphere of Local Self-Government. Decision initiation and implementation power, which is now concentrated in the hands of the Regional Government's legal subjects, is being gradually transferred to Local Government¹ as the consequence of weakening centralization and striving for implementation of subsidiary principle. Changes are noticeable in the institutional structure of the very municipalities, i.e. gradual shifting from municipalities' two-level institutional governing system, functioning till 1995 and abundantly characterized by diarchy, to the three-folded model consisting of a Municipality Council, a Mayor of a municipality and a director of a Municipality Administration.

However, it is necessary to admit that the relationship between a state administration and

municipalities is not based on a legal partnership but determined by limited municipalities' freedom in decision making (Astrauskas A., 2002; Raisiene A.G., 2002). The current municipalities' institutional model has a significant drawback: as far as a Mayor occupies a firm functional position² he/she can directly or indirectly make influence over a director of Administration (Astrauskas A., 2004). Thus, there is the risk of concentration of the political (technocratic bureaucracy's) power in the hands of one person or a group of people loyal to him/her.

The other aspect of the problems the article deals with is connected with economic and social partners' (representatives of the society, groups of common interest) role in making strategic and important to communities municipal decisions. Such kind of cooperation is stated by the Law on Regional Development and is compulsory for EU regions, which get support from structural funds. However, municipalities insufficiently apply interest groups' analysis (Arimavi-

¹ Since 1994 the Law on County Government concerning the transferring of some functions to Municipalities has been changed and supplemented 27 times [5].

² A Mayor is elected out of members of a Municipality Council. Then the Mayor proposes candidacy for a director of Administration.

ciute M., 2004); community representatives' involvement is tenuous (Adomonis V., Paulikas V., 2002; Bucinskas A., Raipa A., 2000; Vaiciuniene J., 1999).

The aforementioned facts indicate the problematic character of municipalities' decision making in the field of self-government. The *main objective* of the current paper is to analyze peculiarities of political/administrative decision (PAD) initiation, preparing and making in Lithuanian municipalities.

The objectives of the research: 1) to define the procedure features of PAD suggestion initiation and taking in Lithuanian municipalities; 2) to analyze the degree of distribution of decision evaluation structural units and to outline the tasks of these subdivisions or groups; 3) to define the main evaluation problems arising in the sphere of PAD suggestions.

While carrying out the research we hypothesized:

1. In municipalities there is no unanimous position in decision initiation and evaluation;

2. A great number of municipalities has not formed special subdivisions or groups for analysis of decision suggestion;

3. Evaluation of decision suggestion is determined by a head of a municipality; experts' help is rarely evoked.

The current research combined qualitative and quantitative *methods* of analysis:

- 1) In July-September 2004 there was carried out a sociological survey among municipalities' representatives. The aim of the survey was to define the dominant procedure of PAD suggestion initiation and identify the main problems in suggestion evaluation in municipalities. The questionnaire of the research was compiled on the basis of modified V.Aramaviciute's questionnaire on evaluation of the state of strategic planning in municipalities. 16 out of 60 city and district municipalities were involved in the survey: Akmenė, Biržai, Druskininkai, Elektrėnai, Jurbarkas, Kaišiadorys, Kelmė, Kupiškis, Marijampolė, Neringa, Panevėžys, Prienai, Rokiškis, Širvintos, Trakai, Utena ir Vievis. 355 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents: via e-mail – 340 personally handed in – 15. 54 filled in questionnaires were returned back. Some respondents did not answer all the questions.

The questionnaire comprised opened and closed questions. The respondents also were asked to express their opinion on decision-making aspects, which were not mentioned in the questionnaire. Closed type statements had to be

evaluated with the Lickert's scale. The questionnaire data were summarized by logical-mathematical analysis of statistical data.

- 2) In December 2004 – January 2005 a structural interview took place. The aim of the latter was to verify the reliability of the obtained results, reducing communication interferences due to differences in specialization between researchers and representatives of municipalities, and to describe cases illustrating some aspects of the survey.

- 3) In February 2005 organizational structure of 57 municipalities was analyzed to find out the degree of structural significance of a Council's advisory unit, i.e. a board, and permanently operating commissions of suggestion evaluation. The analysis of commissions' staff was also additionally carried out.

1. The Processes of PAD Initiation

During the research, the ways of needs identification for PAD in a municipality were taken into account as well as the presence or absence of a municipality's outside frame role in this identification. 58% of the respondents indicated, that the mechanism for collecting of information about needs for PAD in municipalities is not developed enough: usually, already proposed political and public interests groups' suggestions are discussed. At fixed time intervals in some municipalities a Mayor's, a vice-mayor's, the representatives' of a Council board and some municipal departments' meetings, aimed at discussing specific problems and projection of municipalities' policy, are organized. 56% of the respondents claimed that the politicians rely not on accomplished analysis of needs for PAD, but on intuitive personal decisions. In spite of widespread character of this problem only few municipalities dare to solve it. For instance, in September of 2004 Vilnius City Municipality Council discussed the possibilities to refer to different fields experts in order to carry out scientifically and statistically fore grounded analysis of needs for PAD. At present the resolution defining the order of such kind of analysis is being prepared.

One of the questions of the survey was as following: 'What is the procedure of initiation or making PAD in your municipality?'. The analysis of the answers indicates the variety of procedure in PAD initiation, discussion and making:

- An initiator drafts a project of a Council decision, gets approbation from Legal

Department, supplies a project for discussion at the meeting of the heads of administrative branches. If a project is approved, it is proposed to discuss at the meetings of Council's committees, and finally it is approved at the meeting of a Council;

- Provided an initiator does not work at a municipality he/she supplies a written application to a municipality. The application is relegated to specialists: the specialists' committee, which prepares decisions for a Council to approve, is formed. If the employees of a municipality's branch agree that PAD is in demand, they draft a decision project, which is being approved by a head of a branch, a director of a department, a Legal Department, a director of Administration. Finally, the project is discussed at a Council;
- Decision suggestion raised by a head of a municipality branch is directly approved by a director of Administration. After that a drafted project is submitted to a Mayor, a deputy of a Mayor or to another member of a Council. The final decision is made in a corresponding committee of a Council;
- Political decisions are initiated by a political faction of a Council, which submits a project of a decision. This project is discussed at the meeting of the monitors of factions. After that the project is supplied for approving to a Council.

35% of the respondents did not provide the answer to the question 'What is the procedure of initiation and making PAD in your municipality?'. 5% of the respondents admitted their ignorance of PAD initiation procedure. 28% affirmed that there are no standard rules for PAD suggestion initiation and discussing in their municipalities. The respondents gave some examples illustrating the ways of the process under consideration.

It must be highlighted, that PAD initiation and discussing procedure is formalized. For instance, in November 2003 Vilnius City Council adopted the resolution on the enactment of drafting and coordination procedure of legal acts projects submitted by the administrative branches of Vilnius City Municipality. The resolution states drafting and coordination procedure of the decision projects of Vilnius City Municipality Council, the protocol decisions of the Board of Vilnius City Municipality Council, the ordinances of the Mayor of Vilnius City Municipal-

ity and the orders of a director of Vilnius City Municipality Administration. The resolution also states that legal acts passed in the Municipality have to be published in the official website of the Municipality³. Vilnius City Municipality also officially enacted the procedure, which is published in the Municipality website, of accepting, discussing and rejection of projects and programmes submitted by various interest groups, public organizations, community representatives, and other initiators. Calls for projects are also published in the biggest national dailies.

In terms of factors impeding decision initiation 57% of the respondents noticed that the freedom of PAD is constricted by higher state institutions: counties (lower in rank state administrative units) impose decisions on municipalities. These decisions are based on the orders of the correspondent ministries, without taking into consideration the strategies of the municipalities. Thus, it most often slows down started implementation of the plans of municipalities' social-economical development. Notwithstanding the fact that cooperation between municipalities and counties is provided by the laws of Regional Development and County Government the respondents of the survey stated that Law Acts provisions and real relationship between the aforementioned institutions are actually different. 35% of the respondents indicated that these differences result in such problems as unreasoned change in priorities of a municipality's policy and controversies while implementing decisions.

The research carried out by Association of Lithuanian Municipalities (ALM) validates the results of the current research: higher state institutions impose bureaucratic impediments and restrict the policy of a municipality. ALM deduced that there is more than a hundred of laws, Government resolutions and other Law Acts which restrict effective work of the municipalities⁴.

In the course of the research of PAD initiation peculiarities the spectrum of citizens' possibilities, provided by municipalities in submitting suggestions and receiving the required information, was also taken into consideration. The municipal officials' attitude towards civic initiative is evident from their response to the questionnaires received via e-mail. The questionnaire was attached with the letter informing that the research project concerning municipality's effi-

³ www.vilnius.lt

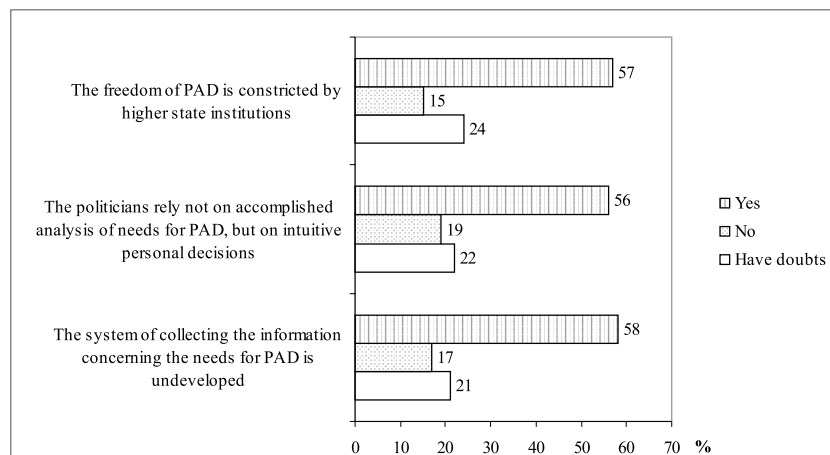
⁴ Lukas D. „Savivaldybių darbą griaua net šimtas įstatymų“ // Kauno diena (02-12-2004), Nr. 280 (17437).

ciency followed the collective discussions of the heads of the counties and municipalities. The particular attention was paid to the importance of the expected results of the research which would lead to the applicable and practical recommendations prepared by experts. 6.5% out of 340 e-mail letters with subject 'Application for Help' were deleted without opening. A resent e-mail letter with a changed subject 'Municipality Efficiency Project' got only one reply. 5 municipalities which had received even 86 e-mail letters did not send any filled in questionnaire or the answer with explanation of refusal to provide information. It must be noticed that such way of addressees dealing violates part 2 of article 4 of the Law on Right to get information from State's and municipal institutions of the Republic of Lithuania (2000 01 11, Nr. VIII-1524). The Law prescribes that 'institution must provide the information about its functions, structure, questions under discussions'. The obtained data is in character with other scientists' results of accomplished researches. For instance the authors of the research 'Electronics Governance Spread and Research in Lithuania' state that municipalities pay little attention to citizens' suggestions and queries: searching for information by municipality's website provided address only 45% of citizens receive an answer. Among the answers 69% were nonessential, i.e. it was information about oneself or details on one's question (Petrauskas R., Limba T., 2004).

Municipal officials' actions show that civic initiatives are treated as of a small significance, thus, a citizen's chances to offer PAD suggestion are limited.

Summarized results of the questionnaire survey of PAD initiation processes are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Peculiarities of PAD Initiation



2. PAD Suggestion Evaluation Peculiarities

In August – September 2004 the following question was presented to the respondents in the distributed questionnaire: 'Is there a branch or a group in your municipality created for PAD suggestion evaluation?'. The affirmative answers confirming the functioning of the branches called Investment Services or Political Suggestion Evaluation Groups did not outnumber 2%.

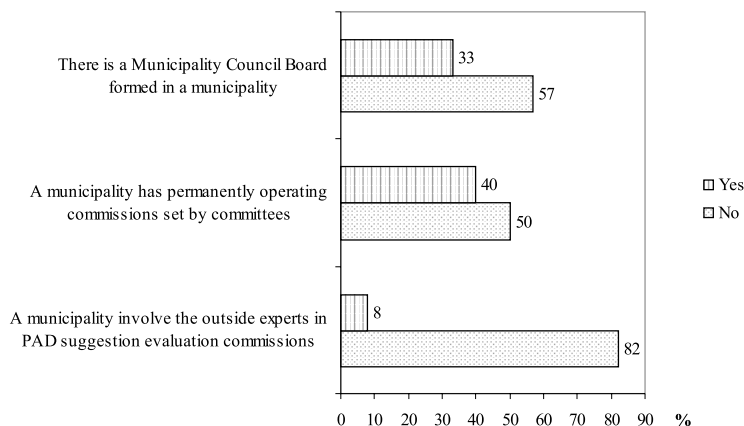
In the answers to the opened question 'Provided there are no special branches in a municipality which deals with decision suggestions which body analyzes decision suggestions?' there were mentioned committees (18 times), a council board (once), factions (twice), impermanent commissions (3 times), a Mayor and his/her team (4 times), a director of Administration (8 times), heads of departments (3 times), task-groups (3 times), an Administration of a municipality (5 times), Law and Personnel department (once), public commissions (once). 3% of the respondents were ignorant which body is in charge of decision suggestions in a municipality. 26% of the respondents did not answer the question at all.

Article 18 of the Law on Local Self-government of the Republic of Lithuania (2004-06-01, Nr. IX-2260 and 2003-07-04, Nr. IX-1693) states that for the period of the authorization a Municipality Council can form a Municipality Council Board (further – Board) from the members of a Municipality Council. This Board is a deliberative body. Law acts also provide the case that a Mayor while dealing with the questions in the field of his/her competence can form permanent or impermanent commissions which are enabled to analyze and solve the problems of a municipality's economical and social development,

to prepare contracts or agreements and coordinate their implementation, to draft projects of a Council's decisions and a Board's protocol decisions, to analyze variances with projects, to deal with other questions and suggestions. Representatives of the society, experts and officials can take part in committees' and commissions' work with the right of deliberative voice in accordance with a Municipality Council's policy regulations.

The results of the survey indicated, that municipalities in-

Figure 2: Municipality Organs accomplishing Evaluation of PAD Suggestions



efficiently use the right to establish a Board or form commissions. However, a municipality's organizational structure analysis carried out in February 2005 shows that Boards are established at least in 33% of municipalities, and over 40% of the municipalities have permanently operating commissions set by committees. Thus, as for establishing of PAD suggestions evaluation branches, ensuring the appropriate level of decision quality, positive changes are obvious.

Following the analysis of commissions' structure it was found out that only 18% of municipalities use experts' and society representatives' help. The interviewees stated it as a problem because a Board, committees, commissions and task-groups are formed from the very politicians and officials of the same municipality guided by a Mayor and a director of Administration.

Organs of PAD suggestion evaluation in the municipalities of the Lithuania are depicting with a Figure 2.

The respondents paid attention to the shortage of time in preparing quality decisions. 63% of the respondents directly indicated time limits, 57% complained about a great number of questions under consideration and stated that while evaluating PAD suggestions municipalities give too little time due to new problems arising again and again.

59% of the respondents noticed the shortage of specific abilities, knowledge and experience which is a significant holdup in PAD suggestion evaluation. State officials are obliged to raise their qualification: introductory training gives ideas on drawing up the state's budget and provides the fundamentals of strategic planning, keeping documents, etc.

Every year Municipality Councils affirm the list of courses. Municipality officials may choose on request any courses or they are sent to at the discretion of a mentor. There are teaching (prevalence in content) programmes missing: the respondents claimed that they encounter the shortage of knowledge in statistical analysis, quantitative decision methods while evaluating suggestions.

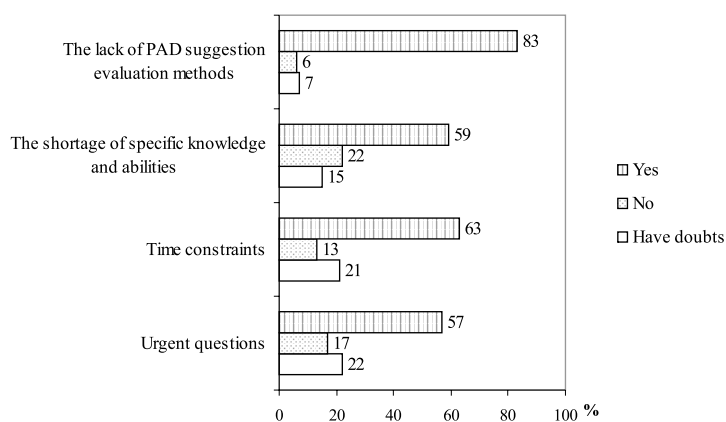
The main impediment for PAD suggestion evaluation is the shortage in methodology of evaluation. 83% of the respondents highlighted some difficulties in the evaluation of decision suggestions in terms of more than just financial (benefit-input-possibilities of municipalities) aspects because there are no appropriate criteria for defining, for example, social needs and relevance of a certain project.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of the respondents' opinions about the impediments for PAD evaluation.

The necessity for defining the ways to arrange the procedure of decision discussing and making inside a municipality, ensuring the validity of the decision, is illustrated by the example from health care sector.

In 2003 the Government of the Republic of Lithuania approved the programme for the restructuring of health care institutions, which was submitted by the Ministry of Health. According to the programme municipalities in cooperation with the Ministry of Health drafted planes for the development of primary health care. The reform is aimed at raising the level of meeting the residents' needs in health care service, higher level of service, safety and accessibility as well as

Figure 3: Problems of PAD Suggestion Evaluation



a more rational usage of sources. Law Acts declare a person's freedom in choosing the nearest to his living place or easily reachable primary health care institution and a doctor (or a therapist) of general practice. Primary health care institutions, the consulting-rooms of general practice doctors can be public or private. Recently the number of private institutions of primary health care with one or more doctors of general practice has risen. The State Patients' Fund pay general practice doctors for provided services according to the number of attributed to them residents and age groups. Thus residents are provided with free private doctors' service of this type. According to the municipalities' plans of primary health care development the priority is given to the establishment of general practice doctors' consulting rooms in the countryside and in the places where state health care institutions are reachable with difficulty⁵. In other words, for the sake of saving means, a Municipality Council should satisfy or reject the applications for opening a general practice doctor's consulting room taking into consideration, for example, distance between a polyclinic and a general practice doctors' consulting room which is going to be established. However, there is a problem in defining the notion 'close' (there is no need for establishing general practice doctor's consulting room) and 'far' (a consulting room is necessary).

Discussion

Summarized results of the research revealed the following features of PAD initiation and making in Lithuanian municipalities:

1) in municipalities there is no unified procedure of initiation, discussion and accepting of decision suggestion;

2) the procedure of discussing a suggestion depends on an initiator's status, i.e. whether he/she is a member of a municipality, or it is an outside applicant/group or a higher state government institution;

3) freedom of municipalities' PAD is limited by institutions of the central authority;

4) the center of accepting suggestion depends on the nature of a suggestion: a positive decision concerning an administrative suggestion connected with the changes of municipal organizational procedures is determined only by the resolution of a director of a Municipality Administration, while political strategic decisions,

projects and programmes initiated by outside bodies are approved or rejected by a Municipality Council;

5) in municipalities the unified system of collecting the information concerning the needs for PAD is still not created; citizens' initiative (members' of not public or political interest groups) is not given a proper attention.

After carrying out the analysis of PAD suggestion evaluation the hypothesis, that municipalities did not form special branches or groups to analyze PAD suggestions, was corroborated only partly. It was cleared out that Lithuanian municipalities rather actively form a Municipality Council boards and commissions to analyze important question and suggestions. The main activity tasks of these structural units are as follows:

- to provide information to corresponding municipal committees and a Municipality Council about social-economical needs and directions in changes of the outside frame;
- to select the most urgent problems;
- to discuss possible directions of decision implementation;
- to draft projects of a Council's decisions and a Board's protocol resolutions;
- to make and maintain contacts with institutions influencing decision implementation;
- to deal with conflicts between groups of different interests;
- to find the supporters ensuring decision implementation, to prepare both agreements and contracts and coordinate their implementation.

In municipalities the extant of experts' help in evaluation of PAD suggestions is not sufficient: commissions and task-groups are formed from municipal politicians and officials guided by the members of a Municipality Council, a Mayor or a director of Administration. Thus, decisions to great extant depend on a political party's interests, competence and guidance style of municipal politicians. The researchers' hypothesis, that decision evaluation processes are concentrated in the hands of top politicians, was corroborated. The respondents also grounded aforementioned problem concerning inadequate municipal heads' attention to discussing of suggestions due to the shortage of time or too big amount of work.

The most acute problem in PAD evaluation is the shortage in the very decision evaluation

⁵ Health Economic centre - <http://sec.sec.lt>

methods. The description of decision evaluation procedure and the rules of decision-making are essential but not enough to analyze and evaluate PAD and projects of various interest groups and communities in the proper way. The shortage of formalized criteria to evaluate social needs and urgency of suggestions or projects is evident.

In municipalities enough attention is paid towards raising officials' qualification. However, the shortage of specific knowledge and abilities causes troubles in decision-making. The respondents feel the absence of practical teaching of statistic analysis, the ways of preparing qualitative decisions, quantitative methods of decisions. It was also noticed, that the members of a Municipality Council and committees are often good specialist in their professional field, however, they need the same teaching as the respondents claimed.

From 26% to 35% of the respondents could not explain the procedure of PAD initiation, suggestion discussing and accepting procedure. It enables to make a presumption that there are evident drawbacks in municipalities' informative-communicative system. We admit that the results could be influenced by the other factors. Thus, more researches should be carried out in this direction.

In order to improve the procedure of PAD initiation and suggestion discussing in Lithuanian municipalities it is necessary:

1) to determine and approve the procedure of PAD suggestion evaluation and discussing in municipalities;

2) to create the system of collecting the information about PAD needs in the society and municipalities' communities;

3) to involve the outside experts, specialists, representatives of the society in PAD suggestion evaluation commissions and task-groups and transfer authority for leading the commissions to the heads of the branches of Administration or assigned members of commission;

4) to include the training of decision preparing, methods and techniques of decision evaluation and making into the lists of qualification raising programmes, to stimulate municipal politicians' interest in this knowledge;

5) to create conditions for the citizens to express their opinion about the questions discussed in a municipality taking into consideration that a lot of experts do not participate in the activity of political and public groups; while providing essential remarks experts would help to grope a community's problems at the initial

stage and find out the needs for PAD to the ones who make decisions in municipalities.

A great number of Lithuanian municipalities strives for the quality of decision making and suggestion discussing. Nevertheless, problems of rational planning and political strategic decisions integration are still not solved. The main conclusion of the research says that it is very common for municipalities while reacting to the problems to thrust decisions, to form the policy and make decisions instead of arriving at consensus and decision planning (Parsons W., 2001).

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Agota Giedrė Raišienė

Sprendimų iniciavimas ir pasiūlymų vertinimas Lietuvos savivaldybėse

Santrauka

Straipsnyje siekiama nustatyti Lietuvos savivaldybėse vyraujančią politinių administracinių sprendimų (PAS) iniciavimo tvarką, pagrindines pasiūlymų vertinimo problemas. Siekiant šio tikslo 2004–2005 m. atlikta savivaldybių atstovų sociologinė apklausa, struktūrizuotas interviu ir savivaldybių organizacinės struktūros analizė.

Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad sprendimų, pasiūlymų iniciavimo, svarstymo bei priėmimo tvarka Lietuvos savivaldybėse nevienoda, PAS laisvė nepagrįstai suvaržyta centrinės valdžios institucijų, savivaldybėse nėra sukurta bendra informacijos apie sprendimų poreikį surinkimo sistema, menkai vertinama piliečių iniciatyva.

Ištyrus PAS pasiūlymų vertinimo ypatumus paaiškėjo, kad savivaldybėse aktyviai steigiamos savivaldybių tarybų Kolegijos bei komisijos aktualiems klausimams ir pasiūlymams nagrinėti. Vis dėlto savivaldybėse nepakankamai naudojamos ekspertų pagalba vertinant PAS pasiūlymus, sprendimų vertinimo procesai pernelyg sutelkti politinės viršūnės rankose. Reikšmingiausia PAS pasiūlymų vertinimo problema – sprendimų vertinimo metodikų trūkumas: nėra formalizuoti kriterijai, pagal kuriuos būtų vertinamas socialinis pasiūlymų ar projektų poreikis bei aktualumas.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad dauguma Lietuvos savivaldybių siekia sprendimų priėmimo bei pasiūlymų svarstymo procesų kokybės. Vis dėlto lieka neišspręstos racionalaus planavimo ir politinių strateginių sprendimų integravimo problemos. Savivaldybėms būdingas ne konsensuso ir sprendimų planavimo, o reagavimo į iškilančias problemas, primetant sprendimus, politikos formavimo bei sprendimų priėmimo stilius.

Agota Giedrė Raišienė – Mykolo Romerio universiteto Valstybinio valdymo fakulteto Valdymo teorijos katedros lektorė

Elektroninis paštas agotar@mruni.lt

Telefonas (+370~5) 2714529

Straipsnis įteiktas 2005 m. birželio mėn.; recenzuotas; parengtas spausdinti 2005 m. lapkričio mėn.

DOI: 10.5755/j01.ppa.0.14.27179