

Abstract: This article examines the changing role of political parties at the local level in the Czech Republic, focusing on municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants. Based on a quantitative analysis of over 3,400 municipalities in the 2010–2022 local elections and interviews with mayors, the study shows that independent candidates dominate local elections and that the number of candidates affiliated with political parties declines with each election. Parties have largely abandoned programmatic roles, limiting their involvement to candidate nominations and links to higher political levels. A seven-type classification captures how parties persist symbolically and pragmatically in rural governance. The limited involvement of political parties reflects the distinctive nature of local governance, where informal networks and non-partisan initiatives often take precedence over party politics.

Keywords: local politics; elections; political party; Czech Republic; small municipalities

Souhrn: Článek se zabývá proměnou role politických stran na lokální úrovni v České republice, konkrétně v obcích do 500 obyvatel. Na základě kvantitativní analýzy více než 3 400 obcí v komunálních volbách v letech 2010–2022 a rozhovorů se starostkami a starosty studie ukazuje, že v místních volbách dominují nezávislí kandidáti a počet kandidátů jakkoli svázaných s politickými stranami s každými volbami klesá. Politické strany ve většině případů rezignovaly na programové působení a omezují se převážně na nominace kandidátů a propojení s vyššími úrovněmi politiky. Studie představuje sedmitypovou klasifikaci forem stranického zapojení, která zachycuje symbolické a pragmatické formy fungování politických stran ve venkovském prostředí. Omezená účast politických stran odráží specifika místní správy, kde často převažují neformální sítě a nepolitické iniciativy nad stranickou politikou.

Klíčová slova: lokální politika; volby; politické strany; Česká republika; malé obce

Highlights

- Independent candidates dominate Czech rural municipalities' local elections.
 - Political parties in small municipalities largely abandon programmatic functions.
 - Residual party roles include nominations and connections to higher-level resources.
 - Party labels often help bypass electoral law but lack programmatic influence locally.
 - Czech rural governance highlights the adaptability of political parties in decline.
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1. Introduction

In recent decades, independent candidacy in local elections has transitioned from being a rarity to a norm across Europe, with the share of independent candidates steadily increasing (Gendźwiłł and Žóttak 2014; Angenendt 2018; Otjes 2018, 2020; Jankowski, Juen and Tepe 2022; Gendźwiłł, Kjaer and Steyvers 2022; Kostelecký et al. 2023, Bernard et al. 2024 etc.). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in rural areas, where traditional political party structures face unique challenges. Scholars have often connected the rise of independent candidates with a broader crisis of political parties in advanced and new democracies, marked by declining party membership and identification (Dalton and Wartenberg 2000; Müller and Narud 2013). Political parties, which play a vital role in democratic societies, are traditionally associated with fundamental functions such as political representation, governance, and societal integration. Yet, as societal dynamics shift, their roles and functions have begun to transform, particularly in rural contexts where personal connections and non-partisan governance styles dominate.

The Czech Republic provides a compelling case for studying these dynamics. Its countryside is characterized by a uniquely fragmented municipal structure: over half of the municipalities have fewer

than 500 inhabitants, yet these small municipalities account for less than 10% of the total population. In these rural areas, political parties are often absent, and local governance is shaped by personal networks rather than formal political competition. Nevertheless, candidates affiliated with parliamentary parties still appear in some of these municipalities, making them an ideal setting for examining how parties adapt or fail to adapt in depoliticized and highly personalised contexts.

This article addresses the following question: To what extent, and in what forms, do political parties continue to function in these small municipalities, and what does this reveal about their changing role in local governance? Specifically, we ask whether the declining visibility of political parties in the Czech countryside reflects a genuine loss of their core functions or rather a transformation in how these functions are carried out.

To explore this question, we used a mixed research methods, combining quantitative analysis of electoral data with in-depth interviews. The article is structured in three parts. First, we explore the presence of political parties in local elections in small municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants, based on electoral data from 2010 to 2022. Second, we analyse the nature of party involvement in the last two local elections by categorizing the different modes of engagement. Finally, drawing on in-depth interviews from selected municipalities, we explore how parties remain active despite a largely personalized political environment, focusing on their roles, strategies, and adaptations to the dynamics of rural self-government.

2. A growing number of independent politicians

The declining role of political parties in shaping politics has been widely observed in advanced democracies and is closely associated with public disenchantment caused by corruption scandals, partisan conflicts, and distrust in party government (Dalton and Wartenberg 2000). At the local level, this decline has coincided with the rise of independent politicians and independent local lists (ILLs), which have become significant non-partisan actors (Rieser and Holtmann 2008; Gendźwiłł and Żółtak 2014; Vampa 2016; Jankowski, Juen and Tepe 2022). However, the degree and dynamics of this shift vary across countries, with independent candidacy emerging prominently at the local level but also appearing in regional and national politics, often reflecting its roots in local governance structures.

Several theoretical explanations help explain the increasing share of independent candidates in local elections and why citizens vote for independent local parties. For example, Boogers and Voerman (2010) present four motives for taking an independent position: a focus on local issues that interest ordinary people; meaninglessness of national politics in local politics (local politics is a matter of pragmatism and common sense); dissatisfaction with politics, mainly with mainstream national parties, and finally independence of national political trends. Likewise, Otjes (2018) suggested three explanations: declining political trust, the growth of parties that do not run in all municipalities and localism as another explanation. Comparative studies also highlight the role of settlement structure and municipality size in shaping these patterns. In small municipalities, support for local actors tends to be stronger and partisan ties weaker (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Aars and Ringjøb 2005; Vampa 2016; Otjes 2018).

In the Czech Republic, this dynamic is especially evident in the countryside, where the majority of municipalities are small and rural. Research has confirmed that municipality size is the most important factor explaining the success of independent candidates (Maškarinec and Klimovský 2016; Kostelecký et al. 2023). In very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants, party politics is almost non-existent; political parties seem unnecessary, because relationships between candidates and voters are usually based on personal knowledge, so political mediation is not required. In small to medium-sized municipalities, both independents and party candidates usually compete, but independents tend to be more successful, suggesting the strength of demand-side factors (Kostelecký et al. 2023). Bernard et al. (2024) found that independents boost voter turnout, especially when competing with party lists, but their success weakens party representation over time and reduces electoral competitiveness.

However, the reasons for the success of independent candidates in Czech local elections differ from those observed in other contexts. In Italy, for instance, ILLs thrive in regions with weak or declining political

subcultures and limited presence of regionalist parties (Vampa 2016). In contrast, Czech voters for independents are not necessarily protesting against political parties but are more often found in municipalities with better economic conditions and a younger, more educated population (Kostelecký et al. 2023). This suggests that independent candidacy in the Czech Republic reflects pragmatic choices rather than opposition to party politics

Municipal electoral politics in the Czech countryside operate within a unique cultural and institutional framework. The legacy of communism, the gradual development of the political system, and the lack of institutionalized party structures have shaped the local political landscape. National political parties, which were historically established top-down by elites, often lack organisational depth at the municipal level and tend to concentrate on larger municipalities with greater strategic importance. In smaller rural municipalities, local governance has long been dominated by technical problem-solving rather than ideological debates, and party membership is frequently regarded as irrelevant for local councillors (Baldersheim et al. 1996).

This local governance style has been described as anti-partisanship or even “non-political politics”, where municipal politics prioritises practical and technical issues over ideological conflicts (Jüptner 2004; Balík 2009). Such a technocratic framing strengthens the perception that political parties are unnecessary intermediaries in solving everyday municipal problems. Consequently, politics is perceived in more individualised terms, with voters tending to favour independent candidates, who are seen as pragmatic problem-solvers rather than representatives of broader party agendas.

Recent empirical research supports this interpretation. Lysek (2024) identifies strong community-oriented and non-institutional involvement in Czech municipalities, often independent of electoral turnout and party competition. His findings suggest that some of the traditional functions of political parties are being partially replaced by alternative, locally rooted forms of political engagement, reflecting both the individualisation of politics and the declining capacity of parties to perform their core functions at the municipal level.

3. Political partisanship and the role of the political party at the local level

Political parties are traditionally regarded as key intermediaries between society and public administration (Boogers and Voerman 2010), ensuring democratic representation (Luna et al. 2021). They have been defined as groups competing in elections (Schlesinger 1994) or representing citizens’ preferences (Lawson and Merkl 1988). Scholars typically distinguish several core functions of political parties. Yanai (1999) and Boogers and Voerman (2010) highlight their organisational, programmatic, and nomination functions, while Dalton and Wartenberg (2000) conceptualise parties as organisations, actors in government, and parties in the electorate, responsible for mobilising groups, aggregating interests, translating societal demands into political programmes, and nominating candidates. Similarly, King (1969) identifies six essential functions: (1) structuring the vote, (2) integrating and mobilising the mass public, (3) recruiting political leaders, (4) organising government, (5) forming public policy, and (6) aggregating interests.

Over the past decades, however, the role of political parties has steadily declined. Falling membership, weaker ideological programmes, and the rise of individualised campaigning have diminished the organisational and programmatic functions (Boogers and Voerman 2010). Ambitious politicians increasingly succeed without party coordination by relying on personal resources such as money or prestige (Luna et al. 2021). Parties also struggle to fill candidate lists, often turning to well-known local personalities or experts outside their ranks. This organisational weakening is closely tied to broader societal changes, particularly the personalisation of politics, and to the erosion of traditional group-based politics (Dalton and Wartenberg 2000).

As parties lose their traditional organisational capacity, alternative forms of civic and issue-based engagement have gained prominence. Petitions, protests, or online activism have become increasingly attractive, particularly to younger generations (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Sloam 2013; Prats et al. 2024). People are more likely to choose these alternative channels when they distrust political institutions or

prefer to support specific causes outside traditional party structures (Prats et al. 2024). The growing influence of mass and social media further accelerates these shifts: digital platforms amplify political inequalities and polarisation (Jacobs and Spierings 2016; Chan and Yi 2024) while simultaneously pushing parties toward moderation and shaping public opinion through influencers (Ding et al. 2023).

These broader trends are also visible in post-communist democracies, where parties are often weakly rooted in society. Although similar to parties in established democracies, they are more loosely connected to electorates that remain sceptical of parties and political institutions. Rose and Shin (2001) describe post-communist countries as characterised by “democratisation backwards” and “incomplete democracies,” which have shaped the party system and party roles. Built without a strong civil society, the party system faces challenges distinct from those in contexts with well-developed networks of interest organisations and collective identities (Mair 1997). As a result, electorates and political parties in these countries are even less grounded in civil society.

The local level illustrates these processes particularly clearly. In small municipalities, programmatic functions are weak, as local issues rarely align with ideological divisions. The nomination function, therefore becomes crucial but is undermined by weakening partisan identification and the lack of motivated candidates (Boogers and Voerman 2010).

4. The specific context of the Czech local elections

The Czech context of local elections is specific and influenced by several factors. Firstly, the municipal structure in the Czech Republic is historically very fragmented (Illner 2006). The communist regime tried to reduce the number of municipalities through amalgamations, but after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the number of independent municipalities again increased. Today, there are 6,258 municipalities; more than 50% have less than 500 inhabitants, and 76% have less than 1,000 inhabitants. In these communities, number of inhabitants also influences the municipal budget through per capita transfers from the state, which in turn affects the political character and priorities of local governance (Bubeníček 2007).

Secondly, electoral rules in local elections are highly complicated, and Czech voters broadly do not understand the mechanism of the electoral system well (Lebeda 2009). Czech local councillors are elected by a proportional electoral system allowing preferential voting. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the electoral rules were very open to the participation of independent candidates who could run either as individuals or create “an association of independent candidates”. Independent candidates and associations of independent candidates running in municipal elections are required to submit a petition signed by a specific number of eligible voters, in accordance with the Electoral Act (Act No. 491/2001, § 21(4)). The exact number depends on the size of the municipality and – if it is an association of independents – also on the number of candidates on the list. In the smallest municipalities, this requirement typically corresponds to approximately 2–7% of eligible voters, with the number increasing proportionally with the number of candidates. The exact figures are published by the local authority no later than 85 days before the election. The following Table 1 provides an indicative overview of the minimum required number of signatures.

The third factor is the political atmosphere, especially in local elections. Local councils have enjoyed long-term the highest level of public trust among political institutions in the Czech Republic (CVVM 2023). Voter turnout is relatively high, especially in small municipalities with up to 500 inhabitants specific to the Czech Republic. In the 2022 local elections, the average turnout across all municipalities was 46.1%, while in analysed municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants, it reached 61.8%. High voter turnout as a manifestation of democracy but without or with minimal involvement of political parties is related to changes in society, especially with the emphasis on the personalisation of politics. According to data from the Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAPP) project (van Haute, Paulis 2016) and Brodníčková (2023), the number of the registered party members declined by around 40%, dropping from 163,749 to 97,998 between 2010 and 2018. Despite the decrease, an analysis comparing partisanship and the number of candidates indicates that the willingness of partisans to participate in local elections has

not diminished. However, the higher number of candidacies does not compensate the overall decline in party membership.

Tab 1. Required number of supporting signatures for independent candidates in the Czech municipal elections. Source: Results of municipal elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 (author's calculations)

Municipality size (number of inhabitants)	Independent candidate	Association of independent candidates
Up to 500	5% of eligible voters	7% of eligible voters
501–3,000	4% (minimum 25 signatures)	7%
3,001–10,000	3% (minimum 120 signatures)	7%
10,001–50,000	2% (minimum 600 signatures)	7%
50,001–150,000	1% (minimum 1,000 signatures)	7%
Over 150,000	0.5% (minimum 1,500 signatures)	7%

5. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach to examine partisanship in the smallest municipalities. The definition of a small village in the Czech context was discussed by Maříková (2005) or Bubeníček (2007). Following their framework, we focused primarily on municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants, defined based on population data from 2018, and analysed the same set of municipalities in 2022 to allow for the comparison.

In the first phase, we conducted a quantitative analysis of all candidates and elected representatives in the municipal elections of 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022, using data provided by the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). Candidates were categorized based on their political affiliation: members of registered political parties or movements, non-party candidates running on party lists, and fully independent candidates running outside any party or movement.

The analysis was initially conducted across all municipalities in the Czech Republic, and subsequently narrowed to 3,405 municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants. In 2018, 1,423 municipalities had up to 200 inhabitants, while 1,982 municipalities had 201–500 inhabitants. We focused on these municipalities because of their unique social and political context: their small size fosters a high degree of interpersonal familiarity among residents, making elections more about individual personalities than party platforms, which are often absent or vaguely formulated.

Although only a small proportion of candidates in the smallest municipalities appeared on official political party lists, our analysis focused on the specific forms and modalities of such candidacies. Czech candidate lists contain not only the name and other basic information about each candidate, but also specify the nominating entity (whether a political party, movement, or association of independent candidates) and the candidate's declared political affiliation. This institutional setup allows for various configurations: for instance, candidates may run on a party list without holding formal membership in the respective party, or they may appear on the list of an association of independent candidates while simultaneously declaring affiliation with a registered political party or movement. Based on a detailed examination of candidate lists, we developed a typology of party involvement using three parameters: (1) whether the list was officially nominated by a political party or an association of independents; (2) whether the candidate declared a political party affiliation or was listed as non-partisan; and (3) in the case of party-nominated lists, the proportion of candidates on the list who declared affiliation with the nominating party. This classification made it possible to better capture the nuanced, and at times informal, modes through which political parties engage in local electoral politics in the smallest municipalities. Based on this classification, we analysed municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants in order to compare developments between

2018 and 2022 and to examine differences between the smallest municipalities (up to 200 inhabitants) and slightly larger ones (201–500 inhabitants).

In the second part, we analysed ten in-depth interviews with mayors of small municipalities². These respondents represented various forms of party involvement based on the classification from the previous quantitative analysis, different political parties, and they were located in diverse parts of the Czech Republic. In interviews, we discussed strategies of political parties in municipalities, their involvement in elections, and activity during a non-election period or other contextual factors influencing party activity in a small community and region. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using MAXQDA software. We used qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher 2006; Mayring 2016). Coding is derived from the roles and functions of political parties classified by Boogers and Voerman (2010).

6. Results

Growing share of independent candidates in local elections

The number and the share of party members in all municipalities in the Czech Republic are decreasing from election to election (elections in 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022). Between 2010 and 2022, the share of mandates won by purely independent candidates rose from 63.9% to 77.3%, and the share of all independent candidates from 81.3% to 86.0%. This confirms a gradual retreat of political parties from local elections. The growing gap between the share of independent candidates and the mandates they win may reflect a self-reinforcing mechanism, where the success of independents discourages political parties from fielding candidates in subsequent elections, thus creating further opportunities for independents and reducing electoral competitiveness (Bernard et al. 2024). This trend also resonates with the notion of “non-political politics” in local governance, where voters perceive municipal politics primarily as pragmatic problem-solving rather than ideological competition, favouring independents over party-affiliated candidates (Balík 2009; Jüptner 2004; Lysek 2024).

The trend of decreasing party candidates in local elections is even more visible in the smallest municipalities. In 2022, 98.3% of all mandates in municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants were won by independent candidates. Of these, 94.4% were won by purely independent candidates, not listed on party lists. Since 2010, this share has increased from 86.8%, indicating a clear and steady consolidation of non-partisan representation in the smallest localities. Candidacy data follow the same pattern. In 2022, 98.2% of candidates in these municipalities were independents, and 93.2% were running as purely independent candidates. This reflects not only the dominance of independents in terms of electoral outcomes but also their overwhelming presence on the supply side of local elections.

² All respondents provided informed consent for the use of data collected through in-depth interviews for scientific purposes. The interviews and all information in them were anonymized. Ethics committee approval was not required as respondents were officials of the local government that was the subject of the research.

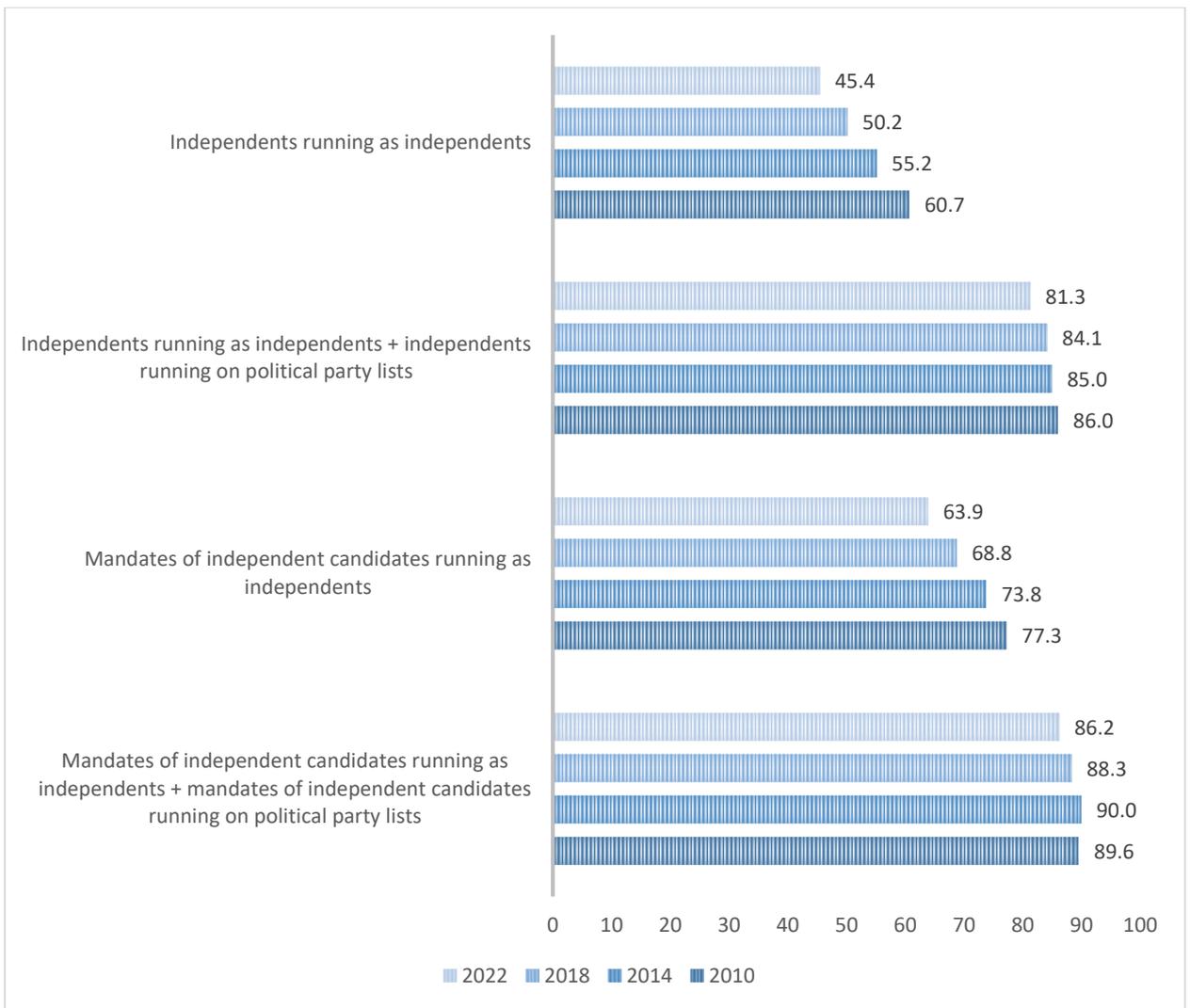


Fig 1. The share of independent candidates and mandates of independents in local elections in all municipalities (2010–2022). Source: Results of municipal elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 (author's calculations)

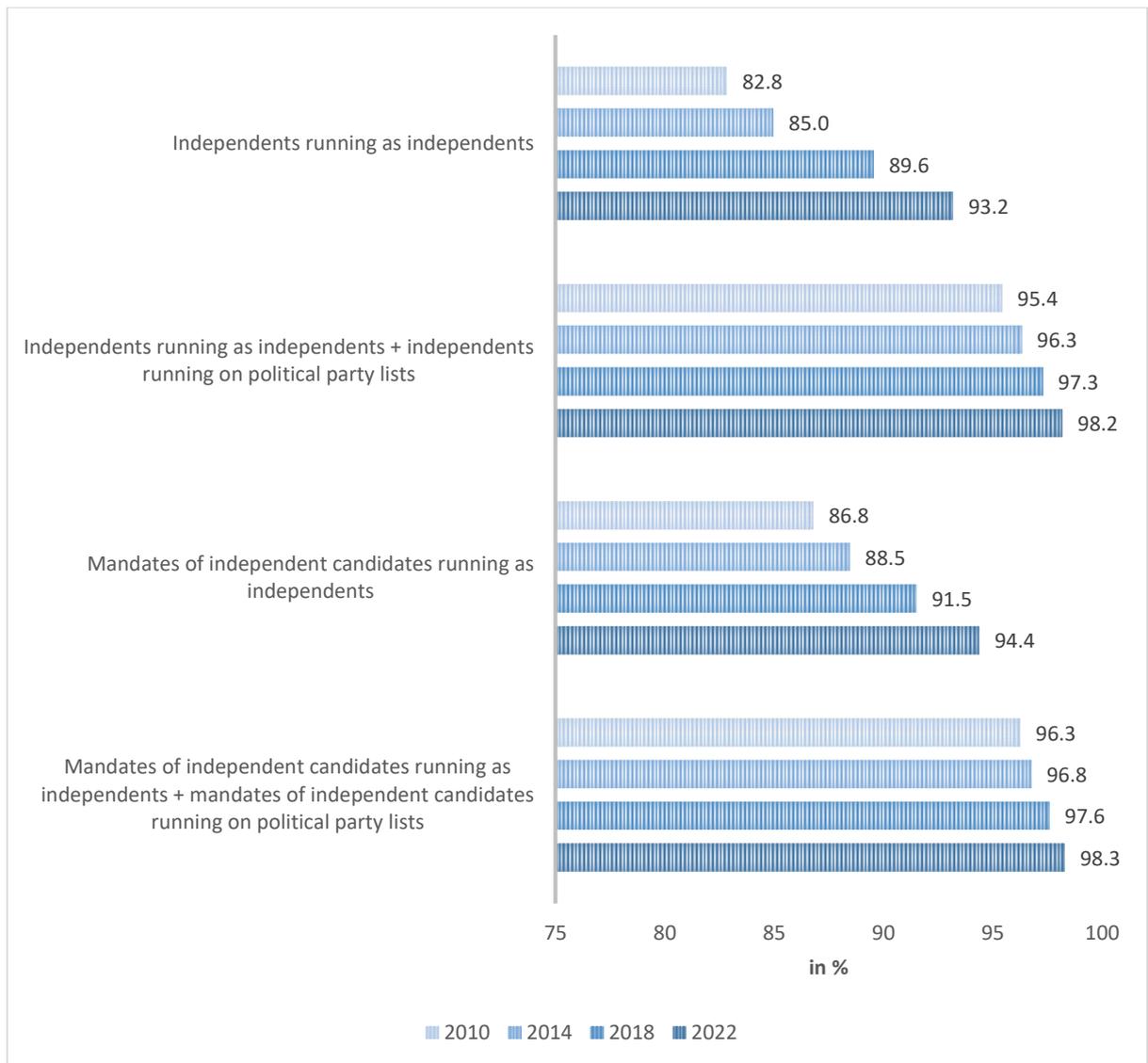


Fig 2. The share of independent candidates and mandates of independents in local elections in municipalities with up to 500 inhabitants (2010–2022). Source: Results of municipal elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 (author's calculations)

Despite the overall decline in the total number of independent candidates (including those on party lists) – from 42,795 in 2010 to 40,255 in 2022 – this decrease appears to be primarily due to the shrinking number of independents running on political party lists. At the same time, the number of purely independent candidates continued to grow slightly, reaching 38,205 in 2022, the highest level in the observed period. Interestingly, while the total number of independent candidates in two last local elections declined, their representation in municipal councils increased: mandates held by independent candidates (both those running as independents and those on party lists) rose from 23,361 in 2010 to 23,684 in 2022, suggesting that independents have been increasingly successful in converting candidacies into mandates.

Tab 2. Number of candidates and mandates for independents in municipalities with up to 500 inhabitants in local elections 2010– 2022. Source: Results of municipal elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 (author’s calculations)

	2010	2014	2018	2022
Independents running as independents	37,146	37,824	37,686	38,205
Independents running as independents + independents running on political party lists	42,795	42,876	40,946	40,255
Mandates of independent candidates running as independents	21,063	21,384	22,162	22,742
Mandates of independent candidates running as independents + mandates of independent candidates running on political party lists	23,361	23,391	23,634	23,684

Typology of party involvement in small municipalities

The most common form of candidate lists in the smallest municipalities is a candidate lists of “associations of independent candidates” with different names, often “For a more beautiful municipality” or “The Association of the independent candidates,” plus the name of the municipality, or “For the development of the municipality”. These lists are not linked to political parties in any way. Nevertheless, although political parties play only a marginal role in these local contexts, they continue to be present in various indirect or hybrid forms. Based on an in-depth analysis of candidate lists, detailed in the methodology section, we identified several distinct types of party involvement at the local level:

(1) Party list with multiple party members

A candidate list officially submitted by a political party, with more than one candidate declaring membership in that party. However, the number of such candidates varies across municipalities. Some party lists include several members of the nominating party, while others contain only a few, with the remaining candidates running as non-affiliated. This type is usually rooted in local political tradition or tied to the activity of a strong opinion leader whose personal engagement often sustains party presence. Once such a figure withdraws, party activity in the municipality typically fades.

(2) Party list with a single party member, others are independent

A party-nominated list where only one candidate, often the lead candidate or mayor, is a party member, while others are non-affiliated and were only nominated by the party. This may reflect declining local party structures, a strategic candidacy to avoid signature requirements, or the ambitions of individuals active at higher political levels. The party may serve here merely as a formal platform, without active engagement in the local context.

(3) Party list without party members

A list nominated by a political party but composed entirely of non-party candidates. Often linked to historical party presence, this strategy allows the party to remain visible even in the absence of local membership, while offering practical advantages for candidates (e.g., exemption from signature collection).

(4) Mixed-name list combining party and independents

A candidate list bearing a combined label that includes both a political party and a reference to independence. This naming convention often reflects an effort to maintain party visibility while accommodating candidates who prefer to present themselves as independent

(5) Independent list with party-affiliated candidates

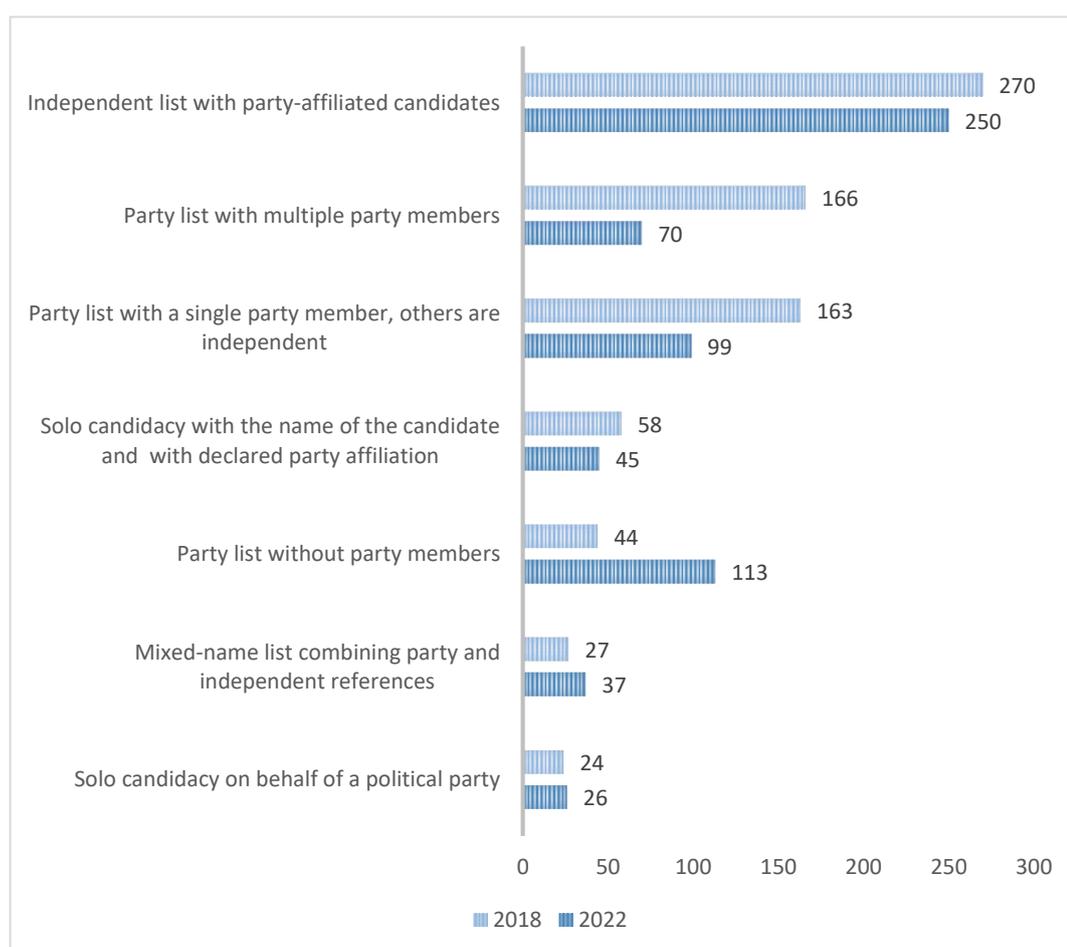
A list submitted as an association of independent candidates, including some individuals who declare political party affiliation. In these cases, the party does not participate in the nomination process and party affiliation functions merely as descriptive background.

(6) Solo candidacy on behalf of a political party

This type refers to a situation in which a single candidate runs alone on the candidate list of a political party. The candidate is usually a party member, but not necessarily; in some cases, it may be a non-member formally nominated by the party. One reason for this form could be the inability to recruit additional candidates to form a full list. Another strategic motivation of solo candidacy may be an attempt to de facto shift the local electoral system from proportional to majority-like voting. Although this does not constitute a formal change in electoral law, the system allows for such an effect under specific conditions. Specifically, if all candidates in a municipality run on separate single-member lists, the election outcome becomes functionally similar to majority voting – voters essentially choose one person from a set of individual candidates. This practice is not exceptional in small municipalities, where it has become a relatively common way of structuring local elections. In both cases, the solo candidate is exempt from the requirement to collect supporting signatures, unlike independent candidates not nominated by a party.

(7) Solo candidacy with the name of the candidate and with declared party affiliation

An independent candidate who formally declares affiliation with a political party. Party affiliation plays no role in the nomination and serves only as a personal identifier beyond age and profession.

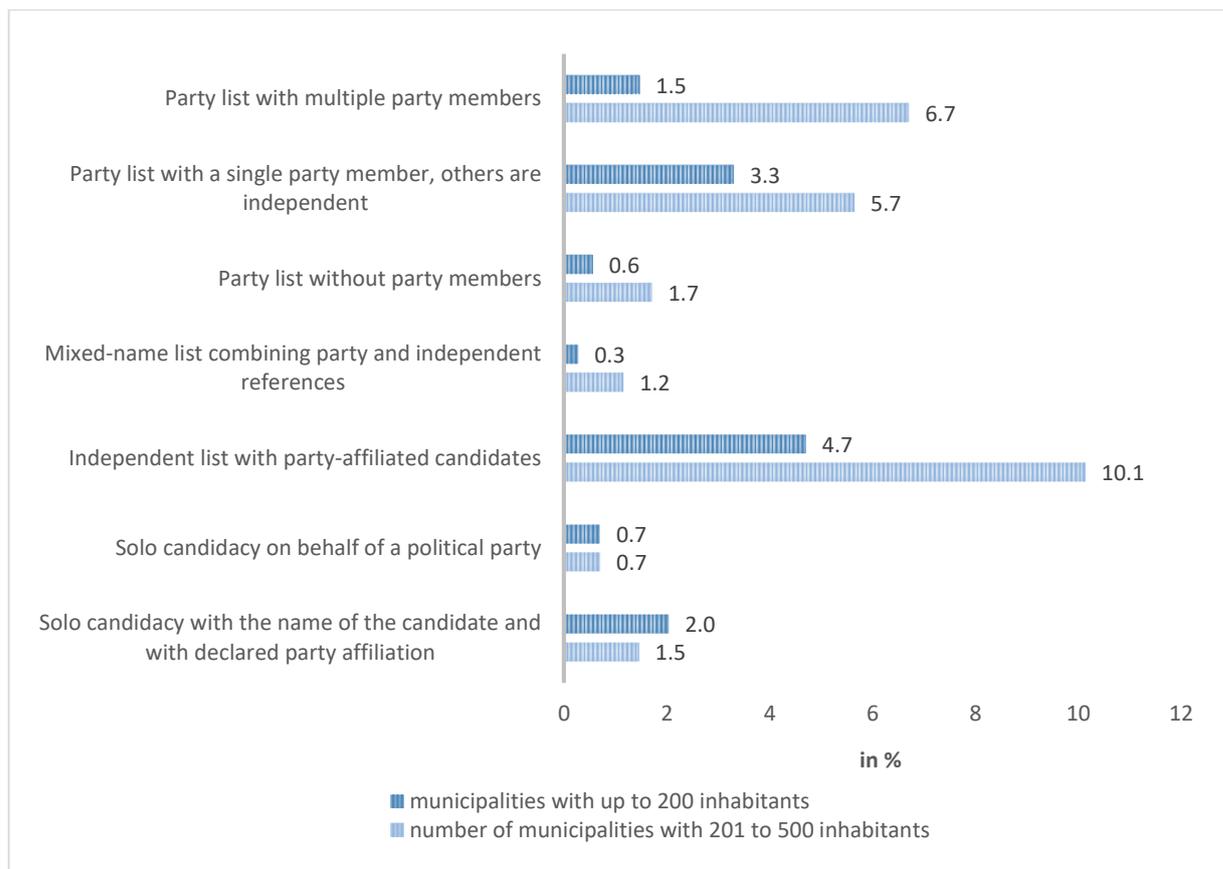


Note: Lists, composed exclusively of independent candidates, are not included

Fig 3. Number of candidate lists by form of party involvement in municipalities under 500 inhabitants (elections 2018 and 2022). Source: volby.cz (author's calculations).

Figure 3 shows the frequency of different types of political party involvement in small municipalities with up to 500 inhabitants, based on the typology described above. It includes only those candidate lists where at least one candidate was nominated by a political party or declared party affiliation, focusing exclusively on party involvement. Each municipality may have multiple candidate lists, and in some cases, more than one type of party involvement may appear, though this is less common in the smallest municipalities.

Although most candidate lists in these municipalities are purely independent and thus not shown in the figure, among the remaining cases with some form of party involvement, the most frequent form in both elections was the independent list with party-affiliated candidates, which remained relatively stable between 2018 and 2022. However, this does not imply that the political party is in any way active in the municipality but rather provides more information about a particular candidate beyond age and occupation. It is very similar in the case of a solo candidacy with a political party affiliation that is more frequent in the smallest municipalities. Of those forms that we can discuss some form of party activity includes the candidacy of a political party with more than one party member and solo candidacies with party affiliation. However, there was a notable decline in party lists with multiple party members and party lists with a single party member, indicating a retreat from more explicitly partisan formats. At the same time, party lists without party members increased significantly in 2022, suggesting the trend of declining party membership and a growing use of party labels without real organizational presence. Similarly, mixed-name lists combining party and independent elements rose modestly. Solo candidacies on behalf of a party or with declared affiliation remained rare and showed little change. Overall, the trend points toward more informal or hybrid forms of party involvement, with traditional party lists losing ground in favor of individualized or symbolically partisan arrangements.



Note: Municipalities where only independent candidates run for office are not shown in the graph, as they constitute the vast majority of all municipalities

Fig 4. Types of candidate lists by share of municipalities in two size categories in 2018 elections. Source: Data from municipal elections in 2018 (author's calculations)

In 87.6% of municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants and in 76.4% of municipalities with 201–500 inhabitants, only independent candidates with no party connection run for office, underlining the overall marginality of political parties in small rural municipalities. However, a comparison of the relative proportions of different forms of party involvement reveals a clear relationship between municipality size and the form of party involvement in local candidacies. In larger municipalities, candidate lists formally linked to political parties are more common, often with multiple party members, while in the smallest municipalities party involvement is typically indirect, occurring mainly through independent lists with party-affiliated candidates or through solo candidacies of candidates declaring party affiliation.

The role of the political party in the smallest municipalities

Findings from in-depth interviews with mayors of small municipalities where political parties are still present in various forms support these patterns. Municipalities with few voters are usually unattractive to national political parties because they orient mainly toward more sizable and heterogeneous communities (Otjes 2018). On the other hand, most residents do not associate solving local problems with political parties. As one of the respondents who was a political party member said, *“Municipal councils are not about political parties, but about specific personalities. Here, we all know each other, and political parties do not interfere in solving local problems. Maybe sometimes at election time, but then they don't play a role at all.”* (respondent 3)

Political party affiliation among candidates in small municipalities is often an expression of individual attitude. For example, a respondent said, *“First of all, those people know roughly what direction you have and how you think, but I find it important to subscribe to a general political direction. ...Nowadays, if I run as an independent, if I run ‘For a More Beautiful Community’, that doesn't say anything about me unless those people know me.”* (respondent 1). In small municipalities, people nearly always know each other personally. Political parties do not serve in these municipalities to simplify choices and alternatives for voters, as voters are usually familiar with the candidates and their opinions. Many candidate parties or movements in small municipalities do not have an electoral programme and assume that people will vote for them as personalities.

The political parties are often linked to tradition or certain personalities and opinion leaders who are active in these municipalities. This fact often influences the existence of the political party in the municipality. We observed two cases: one was the candidate list in the municipality with no partisans but with a strong tradition of that political party in the municipality; the second was the end of the political party in the municipality because the opinion leader no longer ran in elections.

Although political parties in small municipalities are insignificant, they still run, function, and play specific roles in some of them. In in-depth interviews, respondents most frequently mentioned a role Boogers and Voerman (2010) classified as a nomination function. However, the nomination function in small municipalities differs from that of parliamentary and regional elections, where political parties formally or informally control nominations. From the respondents' statements, the political parties had little awareness of the representatives running with their political party's nomination in small municipalities. There was little or no control over the nomination. This role is a win-win for both sides. Political party affiliation makes running for office in the local elections easier. The candidates associated with the association of independents or independent candidates must collect signatures for their support to run in elections. The party candidates do not. A political party can nominate a candidate who is not a party member. One respondent, serving her fourth term as mayor, said, *“I am not at all a convinced party leader. But I didn't want to go to people and collect signatures. I thought it was undignified. So we took advantage of not having to.”* (respondent 9) Thus, they took advantage of an offer from a political party to run under its brand.

On the other hand, when party identification has weakened, and many established political parties are losing their members, they are happy to be present and visible in small villages, even if not in the traditional form. They agree to support sympathisers, even if they are not party members. Satisfaction with a political party at the local level often leads to support for it in elections at a higher level (Mikešová

2019). On the other side, respondents said that political parties do not interfere in forming their candidate lists or otherwise in activities during the election period.

There is a paradox connected with the nomination function in small municipalities. As mentioned earlier (Baldersheim et al. 1996), voters tend not to associate local politics with political parties. Therefore, even members of a political party running for office in a municipality do not always find it necessary to run under the brand of a political party in municipal elections. They do not consider it essential for this government level, and due to the low popularity of political parties and the polarisation of society, they are afraid of losing voters. These party members do not connect partisanship with the local level and elections in their small municipality, where everyone knows each other. Some respondents even linked the drop in support to the fact that they ran as a party candidate. Others said that those losses were minimal. For example, one said, *“(Candidacy as a political party member), can bring you negatives and positives. If the people know you, they vote for you even though you are in that party because they know you, or they don't vote for you because you are in that party, because they know it; I don't hide it. If I'm in a political party, I should run for that party and not hide behind a brand name that says nothing.”* (respondent 4)

This respondent considers running for office at the municipal level under the brand of a political party to be essential for building political capital for future contests at higher levels. Their stance corresponded with the official position of their political parties, which encouraged active participation in all elections whenever possible. *“The problem is that if you don't build that brand in every election, then you can't think that in regional elections or in parliamentary elections, for example, if you are on the ballot, you will get some votes.”* (respondent 4)

The interviews revealed that the political parties also fulfil other functions in small municipalities. The examples mentioned can be classified as the organisational function of political parties (Boogers and Voerman 2010). Although this is not the case in all municipalities and all political parties, each takes a different approach to cooperation. Political parties can help their party members in the local government by solving problems in their municipality. Some respondents said that contact with other party members, including mayors from other municipalities, allows them to discuss how to solve problems they face in their municipalities. Some political parties even provide systemic support for mayors in dealing with, for example, new measures. One interviewee noted, *“As a mayor in a small municipality, I can't simply understand everything, whether it's...I don't know all the laws out there – whether it's the building department or the road department. You go everywhere, you ask questions, and you have some people somewhere who are helping you. It helps then, frankly, a little bit the politics.”* (respondent 1)

Active mayors from a particular political party also have the opportunity to discuss the situation in small municipalities at party meetings with regional party leaders or their members of parliament and inform them about life there. For example, one said: *“And these are the things that you have the opportunity to say through politics, through the political party somewhere, because if you're independent, you don't interest anybody in the end. Who? I come to a meeting in CL (name of the town), and there is the boss, the former mayor, R., and I say: ‘R., this is wrong.’ And she goes to the congress and her deputies, we have the opportunity to meet with those deputies, senators and they simply say: ‘This is wrong!’ (about some local problem).* (respondent 1) The political party is an essential intermediary between local communities and public administration. These contacts can translate wishes into a political programme or activity. These activities and functions could be classified as organisational (Boogers and Voerman 2010) or the aggregation of interests, according to King (1969).

The programmatic function was not mentioned during the interviews, supporting the assertion (Boogers and Voerman, 2010) that it is disappearing from the local level or is not of interest here. The mayors interviewed often stated that they most often solve specific current issues in the municipality, often technical problems, such as water supply or local plans, that are not related to the programme of the political party. Political parties in small municipalities very rarely develop a separate agenda.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this study contribute to the broader debate on the transformation of political parties in local governance by empirically confirming the progressive depoliticisation and personalisation of politics in rural settings. Quantitative data provide strong evidence for the scale of this process: in 87.6% of municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants and in 76.4% of those with 201–500 inhabitants, only independent candidates run for office, while party lists with multiple party members are rare and concentrated primarily in the larger category of municipalities (6.7% vs. 1.5%). These results illustrate a strong influence of size consistent with earlier research (Maškarinec and Klimovský 2016; Kostelecký et al. 2023), and confirm that as the municipality increases, so do opportunities for party competition, while in the smallest municipalities, personal knowledge and informal networks dominate to such extent that parties become largely irrelevant as electoral intermediaries.

While the dominance of independent candidates is well established, our data revealed that political parties continue to participate in local elections through various hybrid, symbolic, or residual forms. Their involvement is often not rooted in programmatic or organizational strength, but rather in personal ties, historical continuity, or strategic convenience. Party affiliation may serve to signal identity, simplify candidacy procedures, or facilitate limited access to resources and networks. In this regard, political parties have not disappeared but have transformed – from actors shaping local politics to actors adapting to survive within it. The nomination function thus remains the most resilient of parties' traditional roles, although it is often separated from organisational control. Similarly, the residual organisational role identified in interviews – facilitating access to expertise or higher-level decision-makers – corresponds to what King (1969) described as interest aggregation, but in a highly informalised form. Programmatic and mobilisational functions, by contrast, have almost entirely disappeared, confirming the dominance of “non-political politics” (Balík 2009; Jüptner 2004) in these local contexts.

The typology presented here – based on seven different forms of party involvement – helps to clarify the adaptive strategies political parties use in contexts where traditional party democracy has weakened. It contributes to debates about the nature of “diminished party types” (Luna et al. 2021), showing that in rural areas with low population density and strong interpersonal familiarity, parties persist primarily as pragmatic tools rather than as ideological platforms or membership-based organizations.

In conclusion, while political parties in the Czech countryside may no longer dominate local governance, their limited roles still leave a trace in the rural political landscape and offer important insights into the resilience and redefinition of party politics in the face of societal and institutional change.

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