

# Slovenian (Eternal) Mayors as Potential Generators of Political Corruption at the Local Level

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## Abstract

Mayors, as the highest representatives of local government, play a crucial role in the occurrence of corruption at the local level due to their position and influence. Owing to their function and power, they are often generators of corrupt practices, especially in cases of repeated mayoral terms. Since they are elected officials, this phenomenon represents a distinct form of corruption known as political corruption, which, although in most cases not directly a criminal offense, is often morally and ethically questionable. Political corruption is dangerous even when it is not yet formally illegal or manifested through criminal acts, as the boundary between technically permissible but immoral practices and actual criminal behavior is very thin. Moreover, political corruption often serves as a springboard for the development of other, more overt forms of corruption. Local politicians frequently redirect significant financial resources toward investments that are neither priorities nor necessary, with the aim of securing electoral support. This is evident in the construction of sports facilities such as stadiums and multipurpose halls, as well as in financing new or renovating existing infrastructure projects in densely populated areas, while sparsely populated areas are often neglected due to a smaller voter base. Such practices increase the risk of corruption and inefficient use of public funds. Corruption scandals involving mayors have been documented worldwide—from South America, through the United States and Asia, to Europe—with Slovenia being no exception. An analysis of the functioning of an average Slovenian municipality governed by a long-serving mayor has shown that, although it is not possible to definitively state that political corruption is present, there are clear signs and indications pointing to an increased risk of corruption. In such cases, circumstances are often ambiguous, not entirely transparent, and suggest the expansion of an

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influential network intertwined around the mayor within the local community.

## Keywords

Mayor, Eternal Mayor, Corruption, Political Corruption, Corrupt Practices, Local Community

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## 1. Introduction

Mayors are the leading politicians at the local level and, as such, in cases of local-level corruption, they are often the generators of this corruption due to their influence and position. However, since they are elected officials, this represents a specific form of corruption—political corruption (more on this below), which is, in fact, the most dangerous form of corruption, as it generates all other forms of corruption. This is especially true in the case of (covert) political corruption (not necessarily criminal), which manifests in various forms, particularly when the mayoral function is repeated over time. In Slovenia, we have several so-called “eternal mayors.”

The framework of corruption or corruption risks in politics is a puzzle composed of (1) the work and tasks carried out by politicians, (2) the transparency of this work, (3) the powers of politicians (both the public powers granted by local authorities or the state and the discretionary powers defined by their work and the way it is carried out), (4) the people in exposed positions (their responsibility, their morality), (5) the public scrutiny (including through public opinion), and, of course, (6) the (technical) decision-making monopoly held by politicians due to the very nature of the work they do. On the one hand, this is influenced by social norms, moral and ethical values and, of course, the personal characteristics of individuals and, on the other hand, by various forms of extortions, pressures (from the wider politics, communities and individuals), and even the level of politicians’ salaries. All this together (the cause is never just one, there are always several) can cause corruption or can lead to abuse and profiteering either for oneself or for another natural person or a club, association or company, or more broadly for the local community; that is, either for an individual or for interest or political groups (or often for both together).

Political corruption, in essence, is generally not a criminal offence in itself, but it is often morally and ethically questionable. Many political decisions are based on the number of votes a constituency brings. As a result, it frequently happens that promises are made and decisions are taken based on those promises, decisions that are neither realistic, rational, nor fair. For example, a road in a settlement with a thousand potential voters may be resurfaced even though it does not need repairs. In contrast, a road outside the centre, where only fifty or a hundred potential voters live, is not paved at all. A similar pattern is seen with other basic infrastructure (such as water supply and sewage systems). Here, too, political de-

cisions may prevail that are based on the number of voters, placing a certain number of people (a minority) in an unequal position compared to the majority. Local politicians (as well as politicians with influence at the national level) redirect large sums of money into investments that are not a priority or are even unnecessary, all in order to gain as many votes as possible in the elections. Thus, various stadiums, sports halls, or other multipurpose facilities are being built; new infrastructure, often not urgently needed, is funded from the budget, or already good infrastructure in densely populated areas is renovated, while sparsely populated areas, where the voter base is small, are forgotten (Šumah, 2018, p. 92).

And why is political corruption dangerous, even if in its initial phase it is not yet illegal or has not yet taken the form of a criminal offence? Because the gap between political corruption, which is “legal” (but not moral), and political corruption, which is criminal, is relatively small, and because it is a generator of other forms of corruption. As Philp (1997) noted, moderate corruption could only exist if it did not encourage severe corruption; but where moderate corruption is tolerated, it inevitably leads to widespread corruption, and only where it is systematically fought and appropriately punished can it be curbed. Political corruption thus quickly evolves into a form of classic corruption, where the benefits of individual interest groups, which are just within the bounds of legality, transform into personal gains for individuals, i.e., when there is a sudden transition from political to economic, personnel, and other issues. While in pre-election campaigns promises of privileges to certain broader interest groups in exchange for votes may be permissible (albeit to the detriment of others, including wider interest groups), this changes when privileges begin to be granted to narrow interest groups or even individuals, with the aim of securing personal benefits (either for the politician themselves, their family, relatives, friends, etc.) or for others (e.g., companies or individuals who funded the election campaign).

## 2. Political Corruption and the Role of “Eternal” Mayors

### 2.1. What Is Political Corruption

Earlier studies and documents (up to 2005) did not distinguish between political and administrative corruption; instead, they generally treated them as a single type of corruption, with terminology varying from author to author (e.g., administrative, bureaucratic, political). There have been attempts to define political corruption, such as Philp’s (1997). However, in his article “Defining Political Corruption,” his definition was too broad. He included forms of corruption that are more generally present, or equated political corruption with administrative corruption or corruption in public administration. Philp’s second definition from 2005 came closer to a proper, or rather, a more appropriate definition of political corruption. He defined it as the abuse of public office so that private interests, which are formally excluded by the rules and norms governing those offices, can nonetheless secure political decisions and redistributions to which they are not entitled.

The first to approach a proper definition of political corruption was Amundsen

(1999), who observed that corruption becomes political corruption when holders of political power use that power to maintain their authority, status, and wealth and political corruption, therefore, goes beyond mere deviations from formal and written legal norms, professional codes of ethics, or court rulings. Political corruption occurs when rulers systematically abuse laws and other regulations, circumvent them, ignore them, or even adapt them to their own interests. Della Porta and Vannucci (1997) correctly noted that the costs of political corruption must also include economic and social costs (i.e., political corruption produces them). A series of vicious circles leads to the parallel growth of corruption, inefficiency, clientelism and (under certain conditions) political protection of organised crime.

However, the first actual distinction between political and administrative corruption appeared in the book *Corruption—When Private Interests Overrule the Public Interest* (Schirrmacher & Schirrmacher, 2019, p. 38), where the authors distinguish between the two forms. However, in their description of political corruption, they focus solely on elections and the national level (government and parliament), while omitting the lower levels, where political corruption is also very much present.

A very narrow definition would thus be most appropriate for political corruption, as proposed by Šumah, Šumah, and Borošak (2020), who define political corruption as any irrational and unjustified expenditure or abuse of public funds and/or abuse of public authority and/or deliberate violation of the law, with the intent to secure, gain, or maintain political power or influence—or simply personal benefit—by an elected or politically appointed official (while clearly distinguishing political officials from career civil servants).

To understand political corruption as it relates to elected or politically appointed officials, it is necessary to first define the levels within a country where officials are either elected or appointed to positions by a political decision. Political corruption thus operates on two or three levels (depending on each country's local self-government).

The first and highest level is at the national level, where the leading actors of political corruption are the government and politically appointed or elected state officials. The second and third levels are one or two steps lower (depending on the country's administrative structure), at the regional, provincial, or municipal level. Here, too, the actors of political corruption include politically appointed or elected officials and holders of power at lower levels, such as mayors, municipal councillors, or regional councillors. In Slovenia, mayors are, in fact, individuals who hold practically unlimited power at the local level—especially when they have served multiple consecutive terms, have a municipal council that is favourable to them, and have a well-established network among local businesses and local opinion leaders. In Slovenia, there are a considerable number of mayors who have held office for multiple consecutive terms (three or more), and thus can be referred to as “perpetual” mayors. The extended duration of their mandates is significant because it provides them with the opportunity to consolidate their power and to ex-

pand their networks across all municipal subsystems (education, healthcare, municipal infrastructure, etc.), and indirectly also into the local economy.

## 2.2. “Eternal” Mayors and Political Corruption at the Local Level

A mayor is an appointed or elected representative of a local authority, i.e., a municipality. The Slovenian word for a mayor, *župan*, originates from the word *župa* (Grafenauer, 2006), which referred to the basic geopolitical units in Carantania. The *župan* presided over the *župa* and was accountable to the *kosezi* (freemen) and other nobles. One of the mayor’s fundamental tasks is to propose the municipal budget and final budget account to the municipal council for adoption, along with other acts and ordinances within the council’s jurisdiction, and to oversee and be responsible for the implementation of the council’s decisions. Simply put, mayors are responsible for distributing public funds. And wherever money is distributed, temptation is great. It often happens that power intoxicates a person (and mayors are no exception) to such an extent that, drunk with authority, they lose touch with reality and do whatever it takes to remain in power—or, in the pursuit of power, do whatever is necessary to obtain it. This can lead to unethical behaviour and, ultimately, to criminal acts. The longer someone remains in power, the more entangled and dense their networks become—favours here, debts there, many promises...and the web grows increasingly complex.

Hessami (2014, p. 387) researched how political corruption affects the composition of the national budget, focusing primarily on how large-scale projects can generate higher profits (through commissions, bribes). Still, he neglected the local level (local community budgets) and political populism as one of the most critical tools in the struggle for power. Naturally, large-scale projects are also being implemented at the local level due to the interest of individuals in illicit earnings, but populism is more about the unproductive and unjustified spending of money to win votes.

Local politicians (as well as politicians with influence at the national level) redirect large sums of money into investments that are not a priority or are even unnecessary, all in order to gain as many votes as possible in the elections. Thus, various stadiums, sports halls, or other multipurpose facilities are being built; new infrastructure, often not urgently needed, is funded from the budget, or already good infrastructure in densely populated areas is renovated, while sparsely populated areas, where the voter base is small, are forgotten (Šumah, 2018, p. 92).

The study “The History of Public Services” (Troesken, 2006, pp. 263-279) examined the development of corruption in public enterprises in the United States and how politicians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially at the local level, used public enterprises to win elections. In cities where utilities (such as water and sewerage) were publicly owned, i.e., owned by the city or other local communities, workers earned up to 40 per cent more per hour and worked up to 17 per cent fewer hours than comparable workers in the private sector. In return, however, employees were often required to contribute to local election campaigns. The

amount of the “voluntary” contribution ranged from 2 to 4 per cent of the employee’s annual salary, depending on the employee’s level of employment. Politicians also often employed more workers in public companies than were needed, just to secure more supporters when election time came. Service prices, of course, were lower than in places where private companies provided services. In the long run, all of this jeopardised the financial viability of public services and the city or municipal budget, while also threatening necessary infrastructure improvements.

As an example of corruption risks, we can look at the relationship between the local community (through the mayor, as the holder of local authority) and public companies that are owned or co-owned by municipalities. The local community has a fairly complex relationship with the public company: as the owner, it holds rights to oversight, partial regulatory authority, and limited decision-making powers. At the same time, it frequently contracts services from the public company and acts as a client or payer. The local community also appoints and dismisses the company’s leadership (primarily the director), and by giving or withholding consent to changes in the pricing of mandatory public utility services—as well as through the ordering of services—it significantly influences the company’s operations (Šumah & Mahić, 2016, p. 164).

In my doctoral dissertation (Šumah, 2018), I demonstrated how the local community (mainly through the mayor as the holder of local government) has a significant impact on corruption in public companies. Corruption risks arise in the relationship between the public company and the local community due to the following reasons: (1) because the local community has a significant impact on staffing (appointing and dismissing management); (2) it commissions work and approves prices, thereby directly influencing the company’s performance (positively or negatively); (3) because it often tries to influence business (selection of subcontractors, suppliers or employment) as well as other decisions (sponsorship, donations).

It is precisely because of these influences that leadership in relation to the local community is often forced to make certain decisions that can only be morally controversial, border on corruption (the line is often very thin), or are outright corrupt. This can include coercion related to the appointment of company leadership, approval of service prices, the awarding of contracts, or friendly “suggestions” regarding new hires within the company, among other things. Similar forms of pressure and conditionality occur when local communities impose obligations on public companies for matters they themselves should handle, or are legally required to handle. For example, a public company may be forced to take on and fund the preparation of a project for the local community (especially the documentation costs), allowing the municipality to avoid expenses by shifting them to the public company (which, in turn, may pass the additional costs on to end users through higher service prices). Public companies are also often burdened with costs not covered by the current municipal budgets, or because the local authority simply lacks the funds. In some cases, local governments or influential individuals utilise public

companies to circumvent public procurement procedures and divert public funds to private individuals, associations, or clubs. This method is particularly common when there are no allocated funds in the official budget and money needs to be redirected from other budget items.

There is also significantly less oversight over the operation and management of municipalities and their institutions compared to the oversight of state governance and operations. This is evident in several ways: at the municipal level, we have the mayor, who, according to the provisions of the Local Self-Government Act, is the legal representative of the municipality and is also responsible for ensuring the lawful functioning of the local self-governing body. The decision-making body of this same self-governing entity is the municipal council, a politically composed body that typically holds a majority from the “mayor’s list.” This renders the municipal body subservient to the mayor’s will (Dobovšek, 2017).

We should not neglect the influence of informal networks (under the control of the mayor) between political and economic actors at the local community level, in which, conditionally speaking, public enterprises are involved and often serve as promoters. According to Dobovšek (2002, p. 45), corruption in the public sector is determined by the following elements:

- Corruption is a process involving at least two people, at least one of whom is employed in the public sector.
- Corruption is always intentional.
- Corruption constitutes an illicit abuse of the public interest for private benefit.
- Corruption is a violation of the moral norm.
- Corruption is a violation of the legal norm.
- Corruption undermines the foundations of democratic development, the rule of law, and the principles of governance by law.

The operation of local informal networks “meets” all the criteria that Dobovšek lists as elements of corruption in the public sector, namely various types of corruption (administrative, corruption in education, etc.) and various forms of corruption (bribery, clientelism, nepotism, etc.), all of which originate from political corruption. Corruption is the fundamental bond that holds local informal networks together, and the operation of these networks has harmful consequences for the local community as a whole, since the network acts in the public interest only to the extent that it serves the private interests of its members (Tonin, 2009, p. 10).

One form of corruption that is common at the local level but rarely mentioned in the literature as a distinct type of corruption is influence peddling (often equated with clientelism). This occurs, for example, when a citizen (voter) expresses a specific request, demand, or complaint regarding a public company or its services to the local community (e.g., to the mayor), who uses his influence to carry it out, realise or correct it. Another form of influence peddling is political influence over the appointment of directors of public institutions and public companies, which creates a sense of indebtedness. Often, influence peddling is also seen as local leaders offering their influence to individuals or groups in the sense of “I’ll sort it out

with the public company”, or “I’ll call the mayor and he’ll sort it out”. Of course, in exchange for “fixing problems”, something is always expected, and if the one offering the services is in the mayor’s “network”, the problems are often resolved quickly.

Even a brief search of the World Wide Web reveals numerous mayors from various parts of the world who have been implicated in corruption scandals. The range of countries with corrupt mayors extends from South America, through the United States and Asia, to Europe.

The number of cases is vast; here we present only a few illustrative examples:

– Víctor M. Ortiz-Díaz—Gurabo, Puerto Rico, mayor from 2005 to 2016 (multiple terms). Arrested in December 2016 on charges of extortion and accepting bribes amounting to USD 125,000 ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2025](#)).

– Erion Veliaj—Tirana, Albania, mayor from 2015 to 2025 (three terms). Accused of misusing more than EUR 1.1 million of public funds, allegedly for the benefit of his family ([Semini, 2025](#)).

– Jacques Van Gompel—Charleroi, Belgium, long-serving mayor until 2006. Arrested on charges of forgery and fraud related to municipal governance ([Irish Examiner, 2006](#)).

– Kwame Kilpatrick—Detroit, USA, mayor from 2002 to 2008 (two terms). Sentenced to 28 years in prison for corruption, including extortion, bribery, and fraud. His administration was linked to more than 30 convictions ([Sky News, 2013](#)).

– Aivars Lembergs—Ventspils, Latvia, mayor from 1988 to 2021. Convicted of bribery and money laundering. Received a five-year prison sentence and a EUR 20,000 fine ([LSM, 2021](#)).

Among mayors of major European cities, corruption-related convictions have involved those of Rome, Avellino, and Venice (Italy), Liverpool (United Kingdom), Győr (Hungary), Charleroi (Belgium), Cluj (Romania), and Farum (Denmark). Outside Europe, similar scandals have affected the mayors of Providence (USA), Mexico City (Mexico), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Bogotá (Colombia), Taipei (Taiwan), as well as Ambon and Tegal (Indonesia).

These examples highlight how mayors, despite their crucial role in local governance, can succumb to the temptations of corruption. In many cases, such scandals were associated with long tenures and the concentration of power, which created opportunities for abuse. Nearly all corruption cases involved bribery, extortion, fraud, and, in particular, public procurement processes vulnerable to corrupt practices.

### **3. Confirmation of the Thesis on the Influence of “Eternal” Mayors on Political Corruption**

If we enter the words “mayor,” “corruption,” and “indictment” into the GOOGLE search engine, we get more than 16,000 results. And more or less, the same names keep appearing. When you look at the results in more detail, you come across quite a few “eternal” mayors (with more than three consecutive terms) and a few mayors

who have been mayors for at least two or three terms.

Thus, [Tonin \(2009\)](#) points out that when selecting a contractor for smaller investments, the mayor's discretion is to assign the business to the most favourable contractor in the sense of a "good manager". However, it is known that an important criterion in selecting the "most favorable contractor" is the contractor's contribution to the mayor's re-election. For major investments, especially the construction of municipal utility infrastructure and social facilities (such as schools and kindergartens), municipalities and mayors must use public procurement regulations, where they should select the most economically advantageous bidder among more than three. However, when choosing the most economically advantageous bid, there are again many discretionary options, which can result in the selection of a specific bidder. The "Clean Shovel" scandal clearly revealed the system of operation for the construction lobby. It turned out that in most public tenders in the construction sector, bids are prearranged, meaning the "most advantageous" bidder is known in advance. This modus operandi also affects municipalities, where for multi-million-euro investments, the contractor is prearranged and coordinated with the person managing the budget money—that is, the mayor. The informal network ensures that those who lend their name to various public tenders and facilitate the selection of a specific contractor by setting an exorbitant price also receive their share. The network between the mayor and local economic operators is characterised by a strong interdependence, where exit from the network is almost impossible and can result in loss of position, business, and, in extreme cases, judicial prosecution of those involved.

### **3.1. Primary Documents as Data Sources and Methodology**

In order to confirm or refute the thesis that "eternal" mayors are a potential generator of political corruption in the local environment, I have examined in detail the budgets, development plans, DIIPs, PIZs and IPs of projects and the composition of municipal councils, as well as the business of the "court" construction worker in five terms and part of the sixth term of the "eternal" mayor (from 2006 to 2023) in a Slovenian municipality with approximately 13,000 inhabitants and an annual budget of between 10 and 15 million euros. The municipal budget is an annual financial plan outlining the projected revenues and expenditures of a specific local community. It is adopted in the form of a decree by the municipal council following the first and second readings of the proposed budget at its sessions.

The Preliminary Investment Concept Document (DIIP) constitutes the initial phase in the investment programme preparation process. It is intended to identify and broadly assess the justification and feasibility of a proposed investment project, including a preliminary cost estimate. The Investment Identification Document (PIZ) represents the second stage in the investment programme development. It deals with projects that received a positive assessment during the DIIP phase and provides a more detailed examination. The PIZ includes an in-depth analysis of the project's economic justification and feasibility, a preliminary risk assessment,

an evaluation of environmental and social impacts, and a rough estimate of the public funding required. The Investment Programme (IP) is the final document in the process, offering a comprehensive overview of the proposed investment. It contains a detailed cost-benefit analysis, risk analysis, assessment of financial and economic viability, and a thorough implementation and financing plan. The IP serves as the basis for the final decision on project implementation and the procurement of necessary funding, either from the municipal budget or other sources.

Additional data were obtained from publicly available sources, including the municipality's official website (e.g., changes in municipal council composition across different terms) and the Erar platform, which displays all transactions between public and private entities as well as registered lobbying activities (e.g., business transactions between the local "court" construction contractor and the municipality, and lobbying contacts). The selected period (2006-2023) corresponds to the tenure of a so-called "perpetual" mayor. The municipality was selected due to the researchers' strong familiarity with local developments and conditions. Furthermore, in terms of population size and budget volume, it closely aligns with the Slovenian average (approximately 10,000 inhabitants and a €14 million budget).

Naturally, there are limitations to generalizing findings from a single case study, which inherently constrain the study and may call into question the broader applicability of its conclusions to the entirety of Slovenia. However, as previously noted, the case is to some extent representative, and similar patterns could likely be observed in many other municipalities led by long-serving mayors. This is further supported by the observations outlined in the opening paragraph of this chapter.

### 3.2. Research

During this period, several major projects were undertaken. Interestingly, in the large projects where the state was the lead entity, costs were relatively well controlled, according to the DIIPs and the projected expenses derived from them. The final costs of the projects differed by only a slight amount (less than 5%) from the original project costs. It can confidently be stated that the documentation was well-prepared, the costs were realistically estimated, and the project execution was well-planned and adequately supervised.

Quite the opposite happened with projects that were prepared and managed by the municipality itself. From the development plans, DIIPs of projects, IPs and annual budgets, it is clearly evident that there was complete lack of transparency, inadequate preparation of necessary documentation, poor planning, and inefficient management, as each project significantly increased in cost during implementation, with final prices exceeding the preliminary or estimated costs in some cases by nearly 80%. And what do the projects have in common? Mostly, they were projects that were not strictly necessary (except for the renovation of the sports centre) or were completely unnecessary (such as the football stadium, where an existing stadium built just over ten years ago was demolished). These projects were,

to a certain extent, a means of gaining political points and catering to broader, multipurpose interests (such as a multipurpose hall and a youth hotel) or very narrow but vocal interest groups (such as a football stadium). In all cases, the DIIP and, consequently, the preliminary cost estimates were prepared by the same person, who also managed the project implementation

So, to summarise:

- Mostly non-essential projects,
- Projects and relevant documentation poorly prepared,
- To a large extent, tailored to the interests of larger or smaller interest groups,
- Preparation of DIIPs and project management always done by the same person—an external contractor,
- High cost overruns on all projects compared to the estimated budget (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** The largest projects in the period 2006-2023 and the price increase.

Project	Estimated price	Final price	Withdrawal in %
Youth hostel	approx. EUR 480,000	approx. EUR 680,000	+41%
Renovation of the sports center	approx. EUR 850,000	approx. EUR 1,120,000	+31%
Multipurpose hall	EUR 1,639,788	EUR 1,993,852	+21%
Football Stadium Tribune	EUR 575,564	EUR 877,003	+53%

The cost increase was calculated based on the projected costs from the Investment Programme (IP) and the actual final costs as reported in the municipality's annual budgets. Since all projects spanned more than one year, the initial project cost listed in the budget for the first year of implementation reflected the amount stated in the IP. In the following year or two, the negative differences—resulting from project cost overruns—were covered in subsequent budgets.

Additionally, it should be noted that the prices listed in the project table are official prices, i.e., prices derived from officially available documents (DIIPs, budget documents). In reality, however, the actual costs are certainly higher, as some parts of the projects were financed from other budget items (with the intention of concealing the actual final price), adding at least 5% - 10% to the official price, which further increases the real final cost. All projects were carried out through public procurement. At the local level, the most common forms of corruption are related to the abuse of position, non-transparent management of municipal assets, and public procurement (RePKRS-1). Secondly, it is interesting to observe the changing composition of the municipal council, or rather, the mayor's list. While the mayor initially ran as a candidate of political parties during his first two terms, in subsequent terms he ran as an independent candidate with his own electoral list, thereby further consolidating his political power.

A study conducted by Troisi and Alfano (2023) found that a high level of competence among municipal councilors, as well as strong and critical oversight by the council, significantly reduces the risk of corruption. Similar conclusions were reached by Afonso and Nelson (2025). However, as is often the case in Slovenia, municipal councils are generally poorly qualified—frequently composed of populists rather than experts—and tend to be supportive of the mayor. This issue is even more pronounced in the case of a “perpetual” mayor, who often shapes the municipal council to serve his own interests. As a result, instead of acting as a critical supervisory body, the council often becomes merely a rubber-stamping mechanism.

In 2014, when the mayor first ran as an independent candidate (after two terms served as a party-affiliated candidate), the mayor’s list consisted of twenty-two candidates, of whom 8 out of 22 (36%) were in some way connected to the mayor and the municipality (either through business or interests—employees or senior managers of public institutions). In 2018, the mayor’s list was also made up of twenty-two candidates, of which 9 out of 22 candidates (41%) were in one way or another (business or interest—employees or managers of public institutions) related to the mayor and the municipality.

In 2022, the composition of his list clearly reveals the network he has built during his time as mayor. Among his municipal councillors in the latest term are the director of the local library and the principal of the local educational institution. Similarly, and quite significantly, among the councillors from his list, as well as the deputy mayor, is the president of the local football club. Also on his list were candidates such as the assistant principal of the local high school, the director of one of the local public institutions, and several other individuals connected to the municipality in some way (either through business or interests—employees in municipal public institutions). In short, ten of the eighteen candidates (56%) who ran on the mayor’s list in the last elections are directly or indirectly connected to the mayor and the municipality.

The operations of the favoured construction contractor also gradually increased, from EUR 377,000 in the first term (2006-2010) to EUR 610,000 in the last full term (2018-2022). It is interesting, however, that more than half of the revenues for construction works are from lower-value projects, i.e., those that do not require public tenders (below EUR 80,000).

Upon reviewing the ERAR database, I also found that the mayor of this municipality has not reported a single lobbying contact during his tenure or during the time the ERAR application was in existence, which is practically impossible given the function he has held for many years. He may not have had an official lobbyist. Still, there is a considerable amount of informal lobbying at the local level, which must also be reported to the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption in accordance with the Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act. And I also strongly doubt that the mayor, given his education and many years of experience, would not recognise lobbying as such.

### 3.3. Findings and Discussion

The evidence clearly shows that large-scale projects managed and financed by the municipality during the observed period experienced significant cost overruns compared to their initially projected budgetary costs. The documents reveal a complete lack of transparency, inadequate preparation of the required documentation, poor planning, and inefficient management. Every project saw substantial cost increases during implementation, with final costs exceeding the estimated or forecasted amounts by up to 80% in certain cases.

While it cannot be definitively stated that this was done intentionally, it is a reasonable assumption that at least some of the initial cost estimates were deliberately underestimated—primarily to secure project approval by the municipal council. Had the actual projected costs been presented to council members, the projects in question would likely not have received approval. Of course, based on the presented “evidence,” we cannot definitively claim that this is political corruption.

However, it can certainly be assessed that such behaviour significantly increases the risks of corruption. The issues are somewhat ambiguous and opaque, indicating the spread of an influential network around the mayor within the local community. The significant cost overruns in large projects, additional financing of these projects from other budget items, the business and interest connections of municipal councillors from the mayor’s list with the mayor himself, and ultimately the growth in turnover of the municipality’s favored contractor all point to certain corruption risks—not necessarily criminal, but concerning nonetheless.

Through the monitoring and analysis of changes in the composition of the mayor’s electoral list—and consequently the municipal council—signs of clientelism have emerged. Since 2014, when the mayor first ran with an independent list, the number of candidates for municipal council who are directly or indirectly linked to the mayor through business or personal interests has nearly doubled. Clientelism is also evident in the increasing turnover of the municipality’s favored construction contractor.

Moreover, the failure to report lobbying activities indicates a breach of required integrity. Also Šeško (2023) found in her research that there is a probability that mayors do not report lobbying contacts for various reasons, as it is evident from her research that at the level of local communities, very few have been reported, despite mayors being in contact almost daily with various NGOs and local interest groups. The amount of “unnecessary work” involved in reporting, not to mention the potential ill will of local community workers, likely discourages such reporting.

### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

In the case under investigation, it cannot be stated with certainty that political corruption is present; however, the existence of corruption risks can be asserted with confidence. These findings are likely applicable to other municipalities across Slovenia as well. What measures can be taken to at least mitigate these corruption risks—bearing in mind that they can never be entirely eliminated?

One possible legislative change worth considering is limiting the number of consecutive mayoral terms to two (currently, there is no limit on the number of mayoral terms). Therefore, after two consecutive terms, the mayor would no longer be allowed to run in the next election. However, the mayor would be allowed to run again after a four-year hiatus—i.e., after a break of one full term. This change would require an amendment to Article 42 of the Local Self-Government Act, specifically by adding a limitation on the number of consecutive terms to two to the second paragraph. This would at least partially (if not completely) disable local octopuses, and at the same time the mayors, who are now forced to fulfill even the most unrealistic pre-election promises and commitments (which often lead to corrupt or at least immoral acts), would be relieved of at least part of this burden or would be prevented from doing so by such a restriction. Of course, there are risks that ties and octopuses would remain, especially in the case of the election of a new candidate who would be a member of the same party or list as the former mayor and would, at the same time, share the same values (good or bad). However, at least something would temporarily change, the continuity would be interrupted (though there is the danger that the same networks might be reestablished over time). Unfortunately, this could also allow old “skeletons in the closet” to be quietly swept under the rug, hiding traces of corruption.

The study by [Liu and Mikesell \(2014\)](#) found that corruption at the macroeconomic level affects economic growth and alters the allocation of public funds in favor of certain sectors, particularly construction projects and capital expenditures. A more recent study by [Artes, Jimenez, and Perdiguero \(2023\)](#), which builds upon the findings of Liu and Mikesell, shows that the dissemination of information about corrupt behavior by specific politicians is likely to alter their behavior patterns. After such revelations, spending in the affected areas tends to decrease. The reduction is concentrated in revenue and expenditure categories most closely linked to construction activity. This includes both a decline in publicly funded projects (especially infrastructure investments) and privately financed projects (e.g., decreased revenues from building permits and related fees).

It would also be necessary to amend the Local Self-Government Act to enable or facilitate the dismissal of the mayor, as currently the law provides for the termination of a mayor’s term only if they are sentenced to an unconditional prison sentence of more than six months. In December 2016, a bill was introduced to allow such a dismissal, but it was not adopted at the beginning of 2017. Moreover, the proposed law contained numerous safeguards that would have made dismissal almost impossible. Thus, in cases of illegal actions or serious forms of unethical behaviour by municipal officials (including deputy mayors and members of the municipal council), there is still no effective mechanism to prevent them from continuing to perform their functions.

Back in 2012, the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption submitted a proposal to amend the law. Yet, so far, there has been no change in the legislation that

would allow for the easy dismissal of the mayor by both voters and the state in case of evident violations of the law or morally controversial acts. What was proposed in the rejected law, despite formally allowing dismissal from a legal standpoint, included so many safeguards that it was practically impossible to carry out.

Findings of Škrbec (2013, pp. 186-189) apply not only to the mayor but also to the relationship between other local community officials and public enterprises (disregard for the rule of law, reliance on connections and acquaintances, greed, evasion of rules, etc.). Thus, public companies are not immune to corruption; it is just less visible than in other public sectors and less interesting to the public, as it does not have such a direct impact on people's daily lives as, for example, corruption in healthcare or public administration. Although other municipal officials (deputy mayor, municipal councillors) are required to report their assets annually to the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, this is merely window dressing, since the Commission lacks the appropriate tools and authority to actually verify these reports. Therefore, certain legislative changes to the Local Self-Government Act would also be necessary here. Moreover, at the local level, there is less oversight and inability to sanction (Kazenski zakonik, KZ-1, 2008) collective bodies, such as the municipal council, which is the only decision-making body in the municipality and the mayor, regardless of what decisions he proposes, can always refer to the municipal council (which is a political body whose majority is usually controlled by the mayor in one way or another). At this point, the legislation should be amended to hold those who vote for an illegal or immoral decision liable as well.

An interesting finding by Angelico (2023) is that corruption at the local level decreases as the percentage of elected women in municipal councils increases. Perhaps the solution lies in greater female representation in politics?

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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