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# Public Perception of the Hungarian Local Government Reform

## Results of an Empirical Study

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**Abstract:** Following a change of government in 2010, the Hungarian local government system underwent a period of significant transformation. The question of how it is viewed and the effects it may have are currently being debated. The centralising effort of the government had already become clear beyond a shadow of a doubt before the adoption of the Cardinal Act or the Fundamental Law (2011) itself. This was followed by the steps of the local government reform, which transferred many local government powers to the state. Municipalities lost influence over local public education institutions, municipal hospitals and many other areas. In this situation, where there was a significant loss of influence by local elites, it became an interesting question to what extent this changed society's relationship with local government. Our comprehensive research has conducted a number of quantitative and qualitative studies to answer this question. Between 2016 and 2018, our research group had the opportunity to conduct four empirical studies to assess knowledge, attitudes and opinions related to local government. This paper presents and interprets the results of this research, and an important area of public attitudes towards local government, in particular with regard to the division of responsibilities between the state and municipalities.

**Keywords:** local government, empirical studies, reform, centralising efforts

In 2017, we set out to map the decision-making mechanisms of Hungarian local governments. Our aim was, among other things, to conduct a legal sociological study of the decision-making mechanisms of local governments and the effects of decisions on citizens that are made on the basis of these mechanisms, in order to provide an empirically verified picture of the mechanisms of the recent past. It was hoped that the results of this empirical study, based on the methods of legal historical experience and modern legal studies, would provide us with a unique body of knowledge on the social perceptions of decisions in relation to the decision-making mechanisms of local governments, which could enrich the literature on local government and help any

legislative reform. Following a change of government in 2010, the Hungarian local government system underwent a period of significant transformation. The question of how it is viewed and the effects it may have are currently being debated. However, the fact that 2011 saw a reform of a more than a 20-year-old unyielding system seems difficult to argue with. Laced with the democratic ideal of self-government, the Hungarian regime change of 1989 resulted in a fragmented local government system with a considerable degree of management authority. The local government model opted for by Hungary, which can indeed be dubbed as the champion of decentralisation, could function uninterruptedly until 2010 with minor adjustments.

The centralising effort of the government had already become clear beyond a shadow of a doubt before the adoption of the Cardinal Act or the Fundamental Law (2011) itself. This was followed by the steps of the local government reform, which transferred many local government powers to the state. Municipalities lost influence over local public education institutions, municipal hospitals and many other areas. In this situation, where there was a significant loss of influence by local elites, it became an interesting question to what extent this changed society's relationship with local government. Our comprehensive research has conducted a number of quantitative and qualitative studies to answer this question. Between 2016 and 2018, our research group<sup>1</sup> had the opportunity to conduct four empirical studies to assess knowledge, attitudes and opinions related to local government.

1. National research. A questionnaire was developed to analyse the Hungarian local government system, in which specific questions were assigned to examine the research objectives. Due to limited financial resources and in order to ensure representativeness, we opted for the omnibus method, which was carried out by the public opinion research company Szonda Ipsos. The technical content of the survey was defined so that the population was the adult population of the country and the minimum sample size was set at 1,000 persons. The sample is representative of the adult population of the country in terms of the main sociological parameters (gender, age, education). In addition to providing an estimated margin of error for the sample, it was also requested that the survey be conducted in the form of a personal interview (PAPI or CAPI).
2. In addition to the national survey conducted by Szonda Ipsos, we also had the opportunity to get an idea of the opinion of the people of Szeged on local government by linking it to an annual survey of the population of Szeged. The population of Szeged was surveyed in the framework of the *Szeged Studies* research, which has been ongoing for decades, on a representative sample of 1,000 citizens aged 18 and over those permanently residing in Szeged, by gender, age, education and constituency. In the 2018 survey, the questionnaire was supplemented with questions on the relationship between local governments and the population. The extent to which the population considers public safety,

<sup>1</sup> The SZTE Sociology of Law Research Group was formed in the mid-2010s to carry out effective empirical research in various fields of study in cooperation with the SZTE Institute of Comparative Law and the SZTE Department of Sociology (Badó et al., 2016; Badó et al., 2017a; Badó et al., 2017b; Badó et al., 2018; Badó et al., 2019).

public transport, environmental care, roads and sewers, street lighting, health care, nursery and kindergarten care, primary and secondary education, job creation, waste collection, utilities, local public employment and social assistance in cash to be municipal tasks and priorities was examined.

3. In 2018, we also had the opportunity to conduct a nationwide survey – covering all law schools – in which we asked first and fourth year law students about some of the questions that were also included in the questions of the local government and the adult population of Szeged. Based on the law students’ opinions, some “triple” comparisons were possible in our analysis of municipal employees.
4. In the spring of 2018, we conducted a survey among the employees of the Csongrád County Municipalities, supplemented by personal interviews. In addition to their satisfaction with their job, we asked them about the operational characteristics of the office, the way in which decisions are taken, how they see the situation and development of their municipality, and their opinion on the changing municipal–state relationship in recent years.

Thanks to quantitative and qualitative surveys, the research team has acquired a vast amount of data (more than 1,000 respondents in the national survey of the population, 111 respondents in the survey of municipal employees in Szeged, 1,034 respondents in the survey of the adult population in Szeged, and 1,150 respondents in the national survey of law students).<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The focus of our research was on the social reflectivity of the operation of municipal governments, and in this context we examined the attitudes of the population towards the operation of municipal governments at all levels of the municipal hierarchy. This system of attitudes of the population forms an attitudinal structure which, in our understanding, includes the dimensions of orientation/awareness, satisfaction, trust and perception. In the present study, we unpack the latter dimension. We will show 1. how the population perceives the importance of local government in the development of local democracy; 2. how they perceive the quality of local public services; 3. how they perceive the division of responsibilities between the state and local government in this area looking specifically at the division of responsibilities in the operation of public education and training institutions; and 4. whether the political embeddedness of the

<sup>2</sup> During the research the following literature was used: Dollery et al., 2006; Aaberge & Langorgen, 2006; Agranoff, 2014; Bjørnå & Jenssen, 2006; Bordogna & Neri, 2014; Brackertz, 2013; Bulmer, 2015; Callanan, 2011; Chan, 2019; Chen et al., 2010; Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al., 2013; Dawkins, 2021; Devereux & Weisbrod, 2006; Falleth & Hovik, 2009; Gawłowski & Pawel, 2019; Giannoccaro et al., 2008; Hardell et al., 2020; James, 2011; Kadirbeyoğlu & Sümer, 2012; Kákai, 2019; Keivani et al., 2001; Kudo, 2015; Milán-García et al., 2021; Mina & Surugiu, 2013; Murphy et al., 2011; Narbón-Perpiná & De Witte, 2018; Nurse, 2015; Powell et al., 2019; Reddick et al., 2022; Reid, 2012; Sellers & Lidström, 2007; Suditu et al., 2014; Tamás, 2014; Tarditi, 2020; Vincent-Jones, 2002; Watt, 2006; Wilson, 2003.

leader influences the access of the municipality to resources. In our data analysis, we have systematically examined whether there are marked regional or municipal differences in public attitudes towards local government.

## 2. Public services and attitudes

In the underlying research, attitudes towards housing were conceptualised as a multi-dimensional concept, with a) dimensions of orientation/awareness; b) dimensions of satisfaction; c) dimensions of participation; and d) dimensions of evaluation. Here we present the measurement results related to the latter component.

The public's evaluative attitude towards local governance and local public services is not only a specific research interest, but also a reference point for the organisation, either as a legitimacy factor (critical vs. supportive, dissatisfaction vs. satisfaction, lack of trust vs. trust). The legitimacy issue is more important in theoretical or political terms, while the pragmatic aspect is primarily – as the term itself implies – a factor influencing practice.

As members of the 'public' (residents), people come into contact with the central or local government system in four main roles: client, customer, consumer and citizen. In our research, the residents interviewed expressed their opinions in the latter two capacities.

Relevant international research has highlighted the importance of citizens' evaluation of public services. This is the starting point for the search for a balance between the needs of the population and the resources available (financial, organisational, human). Among the alternative solutions ("pathways"), research is mainly focused on the restructuring of the division of tasks between state and local governments, the development of inter-municipal and regional cooperation, the outsourcing (privatisation) of public services, the promotion of civic responsibility and civil society participation, and the inclusion of citizens' initiatives. Thus, the alternative to a two-tier model (central and local government) for the provision of local public services is to become a multi-tier model, or to become a multi-level model.

The motives behind these changes are generally twofold: on the one hand, of course, to meet the needs of the population (which is the primary legitimacy factor), and on the other, clearly to reduce the burden on traditional actors. In the last few decades, we have witnessed the 'take-back' of the welfare state and welfare systems, which has been exacerbated by cyclical austerity. This then has a direct impact on the different concepts, policies and practices of public services, which in many cases also vary according to political election cycles. The development of public services takes place in a social field of power between the axes of economic vs. social rationality and is the result of a social struggle between the actors involved.

However, trends are of course not independent of nation state contexts, whether historical – such as the centralisation of societies or civil society traditions – or political structures that are currently at work. In case of Hungary, this is reflected in strong centralisation efforts and the weakness of civil society. The tendency of governmental efforts to weaken the autonomy of local governments was also noticeable in the period of our empirical research.



It was therefore of interest to us to find out how the population values local public services and how they perceive the role of the state and local government in providing them.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Local government and democracy

Self-governance is a fundamental democratic ideal, either as a requirement to be created/implemented or as a real social historical phenomenon. The Hungarian term (“self-government”) is not accurate, and may even be misleading. The English term local government is much more accurate. “Self-government” exists at the level of the individual or family at most, but not at the institutional or municipal level. Perhaps some of the ancient Greek polis (Athens),<sup>4</sup> or the early American (New England) society described by Tocqueville (2000) as a “township” were such, where power was built from the bottom up, and which Tocqueville described as “coming to life by the hand of God”. Europe, with its hierarchical, centralising models and practices, did not exhibit this pattern either before or after the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> In Europe, it is not by God, nor by the people, but by the state that it comes into being. It is the state that regulates the scope of municipal government, not the municipal “people” decide which tasks they are willing to entrust to the municipal administration, the county or the state. There is no direct democracy (nor is it possible), there is necessarily a system of representation, i.e. there is no ‘self-government’. As Robert Michels wrote at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the people do not rule, they do not govern, at most only in-abstracto.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of local government in Europe is an achievement, a “gift” forced upon us by central power, and in this sense a truly democratic phenomenon.

It is important to reiterate that we are talking here about the morphogenesis of self-government, that it is created within the framework of an existing state (unlike in early America), and of course it is another question whether this is primarily the result of pressure from citizens’ movements or of some aspect of the state leadership. The point is that it happens under the ‘stewardship’ of the state. There are, of course, examples (such as the

<sup>3</sup> This was one of the issues raised in a 2005 survey in England, where only three out of eleven public services (police, public education and health) were considered by a majority of residents to be more of a public function (police: 56%, public education: 63%, health: 84%).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s observations on city-state democracy are correct but distant. On the one hand, he states that the concept of citizen includes *ab ovo* the possibility of participation in common affairs (*Politics*, 1269a–b), but on the other hand, he is sometimes sceptical about the participation and rights of citizens (the people) (*Politics*, 1282a–b).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, there is no question of Europe being united in terms of state involvement. This (the “London–Moscow relation”) is illustrated by Alexander Gerschenkron in his work, who shows that as one moves from London towards Moscow, there is a tendency for autonomy to decline and, at the same time, for state involvement to increase (Gerschenkron, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> “As organisation progresses, democracy begins to decline.” “The emergence of professionalism in democracy marks the end of democracy.” “Any system of leadership is incompatible with the most important postulates of democracy” (Michels, 2001, 240, 241). At page 244, Michels (2001) quotes the utopian socialist Victor Considerant, that socialism does not mean the rule of those at the bottom of the hierarchy, but the organisation of society by a group of citizens. The anarchists knew this in advance, and then, for example, Trotsky in Soviet social practice, or Milovamion Gyilas Đilas in Yugoslav social practice saw that there was no question of ‘self-management’ or ‘self-government’ by the people (Haque, 2012, 6).

Yugoslav experiment in self-management) where it can be seen as an overarching principle of social organisation, but 'stewardship' is still present.

At the same time, we argue that there is a very close link between self-governance and direct democracy, since self-governance functions as the primary framework (terrain) for direct democracy. But of course there is no automatic coincidence. And it is not only the constraining effect of state 'tutelage' that is at stake here, but also, for example, the formalisation of democracy by enabling charismatic 'people's leaders' to bring local communities under their control, all the while retaining the institutional trappings of direct democracy.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to clarify whether this is also the perception of the population, especially in a socio-historical context in which there is neither a strong civil society nor a strong public will to create one.

It is assumed that some kind of summative (integral) attitude will be established as a result of the public's assessment of the areas in which local authorities operate. However, in order to 'presuppose' this, we first of all asked about the relationship between local government and democracy. It seems reassuring that the Hungarian population still tends to see municipal self-government as an opportunity to strengthen local democracy. The responses received do not show a normal distribution, but a "rightward-sloping" one. Although there are many (44.2 %) who are ambivalent on this issue, the proportion of "optimists" is more than double that of "sceptics" (16.7%) (39.1%).

Table 1.

*"Local authorities have an important role to play in the development of local democracy."  
How far do you agree with this statement?*

	Valid percentage
Not at all (1)	5.7
Rather not (2)	11.0
<b>Disagree (1–2)</b>	<b>16.7</b>
Both (3)	44.2
More like yes (4)	25.4
Absolutely (5)	13.7
<b>Agree (4–5)</b>	<b>39.1</b>
<b>Mean (1–5)</b>	<b>3.3</b>

Source: OLA 2018

<sup>7</sup> These are not new things in social or political history. Both Aristotle in the fourth book of his *Politics* and Plato in the eighth book of his *Republic* provide numerous examples of this phenomenon. However, even in a formal sense, there is no democracy, for example in cases of 'self-government', where a temporary power, granting autonomy, entrusts the administration of territorial units to political appointees (Haque, 2012).

There are two ways to look for background factors that influence public attitudes on this issue. We can look at the evolution of the mean (3.3 on a five-point scale at national level) across different groups of the population, but we can also look for significant differences in the percentage of the three opinion groups (“sceptical”, “ambivalent” and “optimistic”).

As regards the differences in the average values, we should first of all draw attention to the significant regional differences. Such significant differences are particularly marked in the counties, where the values outside the  $(3.30) \pm 10\%$  zone of the average are worthy of attention. Four counties are in the high agreement (“optimistic”) zone and seven in the low agreement (“sceptical”) zone. In the case of the former, we can speak of an almost coherent ‘northern zone’, while the picture is very mixed for scepticism, with a high degree of spatial dispersion.

Table 2.

*“Local authorities have an important role to play in the development of local democracy.”  
How much do you agree with this statement – by county*

County	Mean (1–5)	N
Fejér	3.95	35
Nógrád	3.93	28
Heves	3.93	34
Komárom-Esztergom	3.69	35
Bács-Kiskun	3.56	50
Somogy	3.53	23
Pest	3.51	110
Budapest	3.50	169
Csongrád	3.42	39
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	3.40	47
<b>All</b>	<b>3.30</b>	<b>937</b>
Veszprém	3.12	35
Hajdú-Bihar	3.07	55
Baranya	3.02	43
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	2.96	50
Békés	2.89	38
Tolna	2.81	20
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	2.75	37
Zala	2.68	46
Vas	2.57	25
Győr-Moson-Sopron	2.31	17
	Range: 1.64	

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

The most surprising is that instead of the expected homogeneity, there is a characteristic differentiation also at a *regional level*.

Table 3.

*“Local authorities have an important role to play in the development of local democracy.”*  
*How much do you agree with this statement – by region\**

Region	Mean (1–5)	N
Central Transdanubia	3.59	104
Central Hungary	3.51	280
North Hungary	3.50	112
Southern Great Plain	3.32	127
<b>All</b>	<b>3.30</b>	<b>937</b>
Southern Transdanubia	3.11	86
Northern Great Plain	3.10	139
Western Transdanubia	2.57	88
	Range: 1.02	

Note: Significance level: 0.00; Eta = 0.286

Source: OLA 2018

With regard to the *categories of municipalities*, a “U” distribution emerges, which again (the “inverse U” distribution) means that those living in the largest municipalities are closest on the attitude scale to those living in the commune, and are uniformly separated from the urban zone between them.

Table 4.

*“Local authorities play an important role in the development of local democracy.”*  
*How well do you understand/agree with this statement (%) – by type of settlement\**

Settlement type	Mean (1–5)	N
Budapest/Capital	3.50	169
Municipality	3.42	262
Country	3.30	937
City/Town	3.25	332
County seat	3.05	174
Szeged city	3.49	1012
	Range: 0.45	

Note: Significance level: 0.00; Eta = 0.152

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

The regional effects can also be illustrated by the very large differences in the *percentage distribution* (structure) of *opinion groups*. For reasons of case numbers, we have now excluded counties, looking only for significant differences in the percentage of opinion groups between regions and municipal levels.

Significant differences between regions are also apparent in this comparison. More than striking is the ‘eccentric’ opinion structure of the West Transdanubian region (Győr-Moson-Sopron, Vas and Zala counties), with a radically high level of scepticism (16.7%), almost 30% (46.1%) above the average, and a correspondingly radically low level of optimism (11.2%), almost 30% below the average (39.1%).

Table 5.  
Percentage of agreement (attitude) groups – by region

Region	Agree	Ambivalence	Disagree
North Hungary	13.4	33.0	53.6
Central Hungary	10.0	43.9	46.1
Central Transdanubia	5.7	50.5	43.8
Southern Great Plain	18.1	41.7	40.2
<b>ALL</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>44.1</b>	<b>39.1</b>
Northern Great Plain	23.0	41.7	35.3
Southern Transdanubia	14.0	60.5	25.6
Western Transdanubia	46.1	42.7	11.2

Note: The lowest values are in grey and the highest values in blue.

Source: OLA 2018

The “U” distribution in terms of *settlement categories* is reflected not only in the mean values (strength of attitudes), but also in the opinion structure (percentage distribution of grouped attitudes), which (like the “inverted U” distribution) means that the opinion structure of those living in the largest settlements is closest to that of those living in the commune, and they are uniformly separated from the urban zone between them.

Table 6.  
Percentage of agreement (attitude) groups – by type of settlement

Municipal level	Disagree	Ambivalence	Agree
Country	16.6	44.3	39.1
Budapest	11.8	41.2	47.1
County seat cities	25.9	41.4	32.8
Other cities	17.8	47.1	35.0
Communities	12.2	44.7	43.1
Szeged	11.8	39.1	49.1

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

We were unable to detect the role of personal background factors in this issue in our national database. Only with regard to educational attainment was there an interesting finding: *graduates* are more optimistic (3.50) about the other three levels of education (at least 8 years of primary school, vocational school, vocational training, vocational

secondary school, high school), while they show a very similar score (between 3.25 and 3.27). Otherwise gender, age, social status and participatory activity were not associated with attitudes towards “local governance and local democracy”.

It would be tempting to conclude that individualistic factors – not co-determinants – are the main determinants of the position on this issue, but this seems to be contradicted by the regional differences that reflect the significant differentiation.

### 3.1. How has the quality of local public services developed in recent years?

Here again, we wanted to know how residents perceive the nationalisation process of recent years. This was not done by asking directly, but indirectly. We asked how they perceived the quality of local public services (schools, medical care, transport, energy supply) in recent years.

Overall, a *slightly critical* assessment emerged from the responses. Most respondents (nearly 60%) perceive no change, but the normal curve on this question is rather “left leaning”, i.e. those who perceive a deterioration are slightly more numerous than those who think there has been an improvement in the quality of local public services (schools, medical care, transport, energy supply).

Table 7.

*How has the quality of local public services developed in recent years (%)?*

Noticeable deterioration	23.6
Has not changed	58.5
Noticeable improvement	17.8

Source: OLA 2018

Since we measured opinions using a symmetric scale, it was possible to examine two levels of measurement. We can follow the percentage of perceptions that deteriorate or improve, but we can also use a higher (numerical) level of measurement.

Looking at the latter level, significant differences between counties were observed. While the counties of Tolna, Bács-Kiskun and Győr-Moson-Sopron are significantly above the average in the “perception of improvement”, the counties of Komárom-Esztergom, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Csongrád are significantly above the average in the “perception of deterioration”.

Table 8.

*How the quality of local public services has developed in recent years?*

County	Mean	N
Tolna	0.48	22
Bács-Kiskun	0.38	51
Győr-Moson-Sopron	0.31	17

County	Mean	N
Fejér	0.22	35
Vas	0.11	25
Somogy	0.07	22
Baranya	0.05	40
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	0.03	37
Zala	0.03	37
Nógrád	0.02	28
Békés	0.02	35
Budapest	-0.04	165
<b>ALL</b>	<b>-0.06</b>	<b>924</b>
Pest	-0.15	110
Heves	-0.19	34
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	-0.20	47
Veszprém	-0.26	34
Hajdú-Bihar	-0.28	56
Komárom-Esztergom	-0.30	36
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	-0.34	52
Csongrád	-0.37	40
	Range: 0.85	

Source: OLA 2018

*In regional terms*, only the deterioration rate in Northern Hungary differs significantly from the average. In terms of the percentage distribution, this means that the proportion of those who perceive an improvement is the lowest (only 6.1%), two-thirds (67.0%) of those who perceive no change, and the deterioration rate is only slightly above average (27.0%).

Table 9.  
*How the quality of local public services has developed in recent years?*

Region	Mean	N
Southern Transdanubia	0.17	84
Western Transdanubia	0.11	80
Southern Great Plain	0.04	126
<b>ALL</b>	<b>-0.06</b>	<b>924</b>
Central Hungary	-0.08	275
Central Transdanubia	-0.12	104
Northern Great Plain	-0.17	140
North Hungary	-0.21	115

Source: OLA 2018

There is little variation *at the level of the municipality* (only that the municipal residents are the most critical, but this only means that their “decay rate” is slightly higher than the average). The same can be said for the social background variables (the decay rate of *graduates and those who show some kind of participatory activity* is slightly above the average).

Table 10.  
*How the quality of local public services has developed in recent years?*

Type of settlement	Mean	N
County seat	0.02	176
Budapest	-0.04	165
<b>All</b>	<b>-0.06</b>	<b>924</b>
City	-0.06	326
Municipality	-0.12	256
Szeged	-0.18	1006

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

Filtering the deterioration and improvement rates (percentages) by the background variables, we find hardly any outliers. The average *deterioration rate* of 23.9% is significantly higher for graduates (27.8%), those who only vote (29.2%) and those who are active (30.5%), as well as in the North Great Plain (29.3%), North Hungary (27.0%) and Central Transdanubia (27.9%) regions. Those aged 50–59 (25.0%), living in the South Transdanubian (30.6%) and South Great Plain (29.9%) regions recorded a significantly higher average *improvement rate* than the 17.8% recorded.

In case of Szeged, the proportion of those perceiving deterioration is significantly higher than the national one (36%), but in some population groups the lowest (maximum primary school) and the highest (college, university) educational attainment (41.1 and 39.0% respectively) and participation activity (41.2%) are around 40%.

#### 4. Perception of the role of the state in local public services

After the indirect question, we asked a direct question. We asked people to assess the growing role of the state: do they think it is good that the state is increasingly taking over more of the responsibility for providing local public services (schools, medical care, transport, energy) from local authorities.

On the whole, the structure of opinion is very balanced, differing from the normal distribution only in that it is slightly to the left, with slightly - but not significantly - more people in favour than against. It can be said that there is neither strong majority support nor strong majority opposition to the state taking over an increasing share of the provision of local public services from local authorities. Of course, we could also say that people are strongly divided in their assessment of this process.



Table 11.  
How good is the growing role of the state in public services (%)?

Not good at all	16.4
Rather not good	17.4
Both	39.1
Rather good	22.4
Very good	4.6
<b>Mean (1–5) = 2.81</b>	

Source: OLA 2018

Table 12.  
How good is the growing role of the state in public services (%) – aggregated response categories

Rather not good	33.8
Both	39.1
Rather good	29.0
Not good at all (1)	16.4
Rather not good (2)	17.4
Not good (1–2)	33.8
Both (3)	39.1
Rather good (4)	22.4
Very good (5)	4.6
Good (4–5)	27.0
<b>Mean (1–5) = 2.81</b>	

Source: OLA 2018

Since this is not a “regulatory” issue but a more abstract one, we assumed that certain social background variables would influence the breakpoints. Measuring at the interval level allows us to examine the relationships in both numerical (averaging over a five-point scale) and categorical (percentages) terms.

The national average, measured on a five-point scale, is 2.81, somewhat below the *critical* range. More critical (lower) values are mainly found at the regional level, especially in the *counties*. Groups in the zone more than 10% below the average value are considered to have a significant deviation, such as Győr-Moson-Sopron (2.40), Vas (2.08), Heves (1.96) and Nógrád (1.55) counties. The highest proportions of those who approve of the process are in the capital (3.14), Zala (3.22) and Tolna (3.34). The value of the range on a five-point scale (1.79) is significant, but a meaningful explanation would require the expertise of a regional expert.

Table 13.  
*How good (1–5) is the growing role of the state in public services – by county*

County	Mean	N
Tolna	3.34	21
Zala	3.22	48
Budapest	3.14	167
Somogy	3.08	22
Fejér	3.04	36
Baranya	2.95	43
Békés	2.91	34
Pest	2.89	111
Csongrád	2.85	41
ALL	2.81	937
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	2.78	51
Bács-Kiskun	2.78	52
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	2.78	47
Hajdú-Bihar	2.70	56
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	2.66	37
Komárom-Esztergom	2.63	36
Veszprém	2.59	33
Győr-Moson-Sopron	2.40	17
Iron	2.08	24
Heves	1.96	33
Nógrád	1.55	28
	Range: 1.79	

Source: OLA 2018

*At the regional level, the averages are naturally not so dispersed (the range is only 0.84), but it is more than striking how the North Hungary region differs significantly from the other six regions at this aggregate level: it is here that the increase in the role of the state in local public services is viewed most critically.*

Table 14.  
How good (1–5) is the growing role of the state in public services – by region

Region	Mean	N
Southern Transdanubia	3.07	86
Central Hungary	3.04	278
Southern Great Plain	2.84	127
ALL	2.81	937
Western Transdanubia	2.76	89
Central Transdanubia	2.76	104
Northern Great Plain	2.72	140
North Hungary	2.23	112
	Range: 0.84	

Source: OLA 2018

There is even less variation in the averages by *municipality*, but it is interesting to note that only the *inhabitants of the capital* (probably mainly because of the issue of public transport) have a positive (3.14) view of the state's involvement, while in all other categories of municipalities the overall view is rather negative. In this respect, Szeged has proved to be the most critical, and this is where we see the fact that the population has favoured a socialist municipal government for several cycles.

Table 15.  
How good (1–5) is the growing role of the state in public services – by type of settlement

Municipal level	Mean	N
Budapest	3.14	167
City	2.82	325
ALL	2.81	937
Municipality	2.69	267
County seat	2.68	178
Range: 0.46		
Szeged	2.59	1018

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

Since we assumed that answers to this question would be based on values and political-ideological affiliations, we expected that some social background factor (such as education or social status) would have an effect. To put it mildly, this was not the case. There was hardly any difference (the range was not at the 0.3 level for any background factor) and since we found that only the effect of territorial factors was detectable

among the aspects included in the questionnaire, we think it likely that the explanatory power of this question is greater for the value system and political-ideological characteristics of the respondents, but such questions were not included in our questionnaire.

## 5. The expected division of responsibilities between the state and the municipality in matters of municipal management<sup>8</sup>

First of all, we have to note that people (also) consider all public services related to their municipal life to be, to a greater or lesser extent, but without exception, a municipal responsibility. Fourteen such services we asked for their views on this matter. We wanted to know to what extent they consider the provision of these services to be a municipal responsibility (no, partly, fully).

National figures show that of the fourteen service areas, there is not one that the majority of people do not consider to be even partly a municipal responsibility. Thus, people believe that shaping the living conditions in their municipalities is primarily a self-governing task. From this point of view, of course, they do not expect paternalism from local authorities to the same extent for all services: most of all in the field of public employment and least of all in the field of utilities, but even the latter is still considered by the majority to be (partly or wholly) a local government responsibility.

Table 16.

*Is it the responsibility of the local government to provide services to the public (%)?*

	1 This is not a municipal task	2 This is partly a municipal responsibility	3 This is a self-governing task	2 + 3 This is partly or entirely a muni- cipal responsibility
Utility services	25.1	32.8	42.1	74.9
Creation of jobs	16.1	42.7	41.2	83.9
Public transport	15.2	34.3	50.5	84.8
Health care	14.9	37.8	47.3	85.1
Road network	11.8	42.6	45.6	88.2
Sewer network	11.2	34.9	53.9	88.8
Refuse collection, waste farming	11.0	27.8	61.2	89.0
Providing street lighting	11.0	29.5	59.5	89.0
Primary and secondary schools, Education	10.6	40.9	48.5	89.4
Public safety	9.8	40.8	49.4	90.2

<sup>8</sup> The so-called ESOMAR "A" category.

	1 This is not a municipal task	2 This is partly a municipal responsibility	3 This is a self-governing task	2 + 3 This is partly or entirely a muni- cipal responsibility
Day nursery, kindergarten	7.4	34.1	58.4	92.6
Social assistance in cash	6.6	30.6	62.8	93.4
Environmental care, public services	5.7	26.8	67.5	94.3
Local public employment	4.3	24.9	70.8	95.7

*Note:* Grey numbers indicate the highest proportion of respondents who chose the given response category.

*Source:* OLA 2018

Based on the responses, a scale of 0 to 1 was created,<sup>9</sup> where a higher value indicates that it is considered more of a municipal responsibility and a lower value indicates that it is considered less of a municipal responsibility. No service scored less than 0.5 on average, with all services scoring between 0.59 and 0.83.

Table 17.

*Is it the responsibility of the municipality to provide services to the public?*

	All (index values)
Local public employment	0.83
Environmental care, public cleanliness	0.81
Social assistance in cash	0.78
Day nursery, kindergarten	0.76
Garbage collection, waste management	0.75
Providing street lighting	0.74
Sewer network	0.71
Public safety	0.70
Primary and secondary schools, education	0.69
Public transport	0.68
Road network	0.67
Health care	0.66
Creation of jobs	0.63
Utility services	0.59

*Source:* OLA 2018

<sup>9</sup> 0 = “this is not a local government task”; 0.5 = “this is partly a local government task”; 1 = “this is a local government task”.

We then used analysis of variance to examine the factors affecting the scale value. At the numerical level of measurement, rather interesting spatial patterns emerged, both at the level of municipalities, regions and counties. The most important feature of the pattern at the municipal level is the striking separation of the *inhabitants of Budapest* (green) from the other three categories (county, city, municipality), who show the lowest values for all services, i.e. those who think most in terms of a state/self-government division of tasks. Another important feature of the pattern is that the highest values (red) are given “alternately” (alternating between services) by the inhabitants of two categories (*county seats, municipalities*), i.e. they are the ones who most often identify local government as the “task holder”. In all cases, the values of those in the *city* category are “below” these two categories. *Szeged* does not systematically deviate (in any direction) from the triad of county–capital–city–village. In five cases it is at a level higher than the maximum value and in four cases it is below the minimum value of the triad (and in four cases it is somewhere in between).

Table 18.

*Whether the local government is responsible for providing services to the public  
– index values by type of settlement*

	Budapest	County seat	City	Municipality	Min.–max. difference	Szeged
Local public employment	0.70	0.84	0.84	0.90	0.20	0.87
Caring for the environment, public services	0.68	0.83	0.83	0.85	0.17	0.89
Social security cash benefits vision	0.69	0.77	0.79	0.83	0.14	0.72
Nursery, kindergarten and pre-school vision	0.64	0.74	0.78	0.81	0.17	0.78
Garbage collection, corpse-forestry	0.60	0.79	0.78	0.79	0.19	0.83
The provision of street lighting visit	0.56	0.82	0.78	0.77	0.26	0.85
Sewer network	0.57	0.78	0.75	0.72	0.21	0.78
Public safety	0.60	0.74	0.73	0.70	0.14	0.72
Primary and secondary schools education and training	0.56	0.67	0.73	0.73	0.17	0.65
Public transport	0.44	0.85	0.76	0.61	0.41	0.88
Road network	0.54	0.74	0.68	0.69	0.20	0.71
Health care	0.53	0.64	0.67	0.75	0.11	0.57
Creation of jobs	0.50	0.64	0.64	0.67	0.17	0.6
Utility services	0.43	0.72	0.59	0.59	0.29	0.63

*Note:* Green number = minimum value; red number = maximum value.

*Source:* OLA 2018; SLA 2018

In the regional cross-section, we can highlight two regions with tendencies: Northern Hungary shows the highest values (in red), i.e. it is “municipality-centric” in all services, while at the other pole, the region of *Central Hungary* shows the lowest values (in green) in 9 out of 14 cases and minimum values in 5 cases (as the capital is located in this region, this is not surprising).

Table 19.  
*Whether the local government is responsible for providing services to the public  
– index values by region*

	Central Hungary	Central Transdanubia	Western Transdanubia	Southern Transdanubia	Northern Hungary	Northern Great Plain	Southern Great Plain	Min. – max.
Local public employment	0.74	0.85	0.81	0.88	0.97	0.84	0.86	0.23
Environmental care, public services	0.73	0.80	0.84	0.75	0.95	0.79	0.89	0.22
Social cash care	0.72	0.77	0.70	0.87	0.91	0.76	0.82	0.22
Nursery, kindergarten care	0.69	0.81	0.70	0.73	0.83	0.76	0.85	0.16
Garbage collection, corpse-forestry	0.68	0.68	0.75	0.75	0.90	0.77	0.81	0.22
Street lighting	0.66	0.76	0.80	0.64	0.86	0.75	0.81	0.20
Sewer network	0.65	0.71	0.75	0.60	0.82	0.75	0.77	0.17
Public safety	0.66	0.71	0.78	0.69	0.82	0.65	0.68	0.17
Primary and secondary schools education and training	0.61	0.76	0.66	0.65	0.79	0.69	0.76	0.18
Public transport	0.56	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.84	0.68	0.67	0.28
Road network	0.61	0.70	0.69	0.57	0.80	0.66	0.70	0.23
Health care	0.59	0.66	0.62	0.70	0.78	0.65	0.74	0.15
Creation of jobs	0.55	0.66	0.65	0.60	0.73	0.63	0.67	0.18
Public utility services comments	0.49	0.64	0.68	0.50	0.76	0.61	0.54	0.27

Source: OLA 2018

Table 20.  
*Whether the local government is responsible for providing services to the public – index values by country*

	Baranya	Bács	Békés	Borsod	Csongrád	Fejér	Győr	Hajdú	Heves	Komárom	Nógrád	Pest	Somogy	Szabolcs	Szolnok	Tolna	Vas	Veszprém	Zala	All	Min.–max.
Public safety	0.64	0.65	0.70	0.69	0.68	0.77	0.73	0.69	0.87	0.61	1.00	0.75	0.73	0.65	0.58	0.74	0.70	0.73	0.83	0.70	0.42
Public transport	0.63	0.60	0.59	0.68	0.83	0.70	0.66	0.72	0.99	0.63	0.99	0.77	0.81	0.63	0.69	0.80	0.81	0.83	0.69	0.68	0.55
Environmental care, public cleanliness	0.73	0.82	0.98	0.93	0.89	0.96	0.72	0.79	0.96	0.77	1.00	0.82	0.80	0.87	0.68	0.74	0.83	0.67	0.88	0.81	0.33
Road network	0.56	0.73	0.67	0.68	0.68	0.75	0.63	0.70	0.90	0.64	0.94	0.72	0.64	0.70	0.56	0.53	0.90	0.70	0.62	0.67	0.41
Sewer network	0.58	0.76	0.78	0.69	0.77	0.78	0.51	0.85	0.87	0.68	0.99	0.79	0.70	0.73	0.64	0.55	0.87	0.68	0.76	0.71	0.44
Street lighting	0.63	0.76	0.83	0.82	0.86	0.89	0.67	0.87	0.83	0.76	1.00	0.84	0.85	0.67	0.67	0.44	0.85	0.61	0.82	0.74	0.56
Health care	0.72	0.68	0.91	0.61	0.67	0.80	0.72	0.80	0.91	0.55	0.94	0.68	0.78	0.60	0.48	0.57	0.50	0.62	0.64	0.66	0.46
Nursery, kindergarten care	0.75	0.78	0.95	0.72	0.84	0.85	0.70	0.83	0.88	0.71	0.99	0.77	0.74	0.80	0.59	0.70	0.57	0.87	0.76	0.76	0.42
Running primary and secondary schools, education	0.63	0.75	0.83	0.63	0.72	0.77	0.66	0.73	0.87	0.63	0.99	0.70	0.68	0.71	0.61	0.65	0.58	0.86	0.69	0.69	0.43
Existence of jobs	0.73	0.69	0.63	0.54	0.67	0.69	0.67	0.64	0.86	0.54	0.96	0.62	0.56	0.68	0.54	0.37	0.57	0.74	0.68	0.63	0.59
Waste transport, waste management	0.72	0.81	0.77	0.88	0.85	0.72	0.71	0.83	0.86	0.60	1.00	0.80	0.79	0.81	0.62	0.76	0.86	0.71	0.72	0.75	0.40
Utility services	0.58	0.54	0.50	0.55	0.59	0.63	0.67	0.70	0.92	0.56	0.96	0.60	0.45	0.58	0.51	0.39	0.77	0.73	0.65	0.59	0.57
Local public employment	0.86	0.75	0.97	0.97	0.91	0.91	0.71	0.87	0.95	0.79	0.99	0.81	0.78	0.92	0.68	1.00	0.84	0.84	0.82	0.83	0.32
Social assistance in cash	0.86	0.74	0.84	0.89	0.89	0.86	0.62	0.74	0.87	0.64	0.99	0.77	0.76	0.86	0.66	0.99	0.64	0.81	0.76	0.78	0.37

Source: OLA 2018



In the table below, the county (counties) with the maximum value are marked in red and the counties with values close to the maximum are marked in pink. Dark green indicates those representing the minimum value and light green those close to it. The counties between the two pole fields remain in white.

The most striking phenomenon of inter-county disparities is represented by the county of *Nógrád*, which stands out (“outgrows”) its extreme local government centrality. There are some counties (Heves, Békés) which, in addition to their intermediate values, produce only a few values close to the maximum. Alongside them, there are several “green” counties (above all *Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok* and *Komárom-Esztergom*, then *Győr-Moson-Sopron*, *Baranya*), whose inhabitants prefer a more state/self-government division of tasks. *Pest* without Budapest is the only region in the intermediate zone for all services (without minimum and maximum intermediate values).

Otherwise, the largest differences between counties were in the areas of job creation (0.59), utilities (0.57), street lighting (0.56) and public transport (0.55).

The division of responsibilities between local government and the state in the field of municipal management is an area of concern where the responses of the population are not only explained by spatial variables (municipal level, region, county), but also by social background variables (education, social status).

As far as education is concerned, two specific features of this relationship should be highlighted. The first is that the four education categories tend to *move together* (giving close values) for the 14 services. The other is that, on virtually all issues, the *lowest educational attainment levels are the most likely to take a self-government-centred position* (the exception is street lighting, where the lowest value is shown).

Table 21.

*Whether the local government is responsible for providing services to the public  
– index values by educational level*

	Max. 8 general	Apprentice- ship- training	Secondary school, vocational school	College, university
Public safety	0.78	0.65	0.67	0.69
Public transport	0.76	0.64	0.65	0.64
Environmental care, public cleanliness	0.85	0.81	0.78	0.79
Road network	0.75	0.65	0.65	0.60
Sewer network	0.77	0.68	0.71	0.68
Street lighting	0.72	0.74	0.76	0.75
Health care	0.70	0.67	0.63	0.63
Day nursery, kindergarten	0.79	0.80	0.72	0.70
Running primary and secondary schools, Education	0.76	0.74	0.62	0.63
Creation of jobs	0.74	0.58	0.57	0.60

	Max. 8 general	Apprentice- ship- training	Secondary school, vocational school	College, university
Garbage collection, waste management	0.79	0.75	0.73	0.73
Utility services	0.70	0.53	0.55	0.55
Local public employment	0.87	0.85	0.79	0.82
Social assistance in cash	0.82	0.77	0.75	0.78

Source: OLA 2018

In case of social status, the pattern is similar to that of educational attainment: Basically, the co-movement of different statuses in the evaluation is also observed here, but it is also clear that the lowest status (ESOMAR category “E”) is the most likely to express municipal centrality (again, the exception is street lighting, but not the highest “A” status, but those in the middle “B” and “C” categories are most likely to hold this view), with higher status people thinking more in terms of task sharing.

Table 22.

*Whether the local government is responsible for providing services to the public – index values by social status*

	“A”	“B”	“C”	“D”	“E”
Public safety	0.65	0.66	0.68	0.66	0.74
Public transport	0.59	0.66	0.67	0.61	0.71
Environmental care, public cleanliness	0.70	0.78	0.80	0.81	0.84
Road network	0.59	0.61	0.65	0.64	0.71
Sewer network	0.61	0.70	0.74	0.63	0.74
Street lighting	0.70	0.76	0.76	0.69	0.74
Health care	0.63	0.59	0.64	0.62	0.71
Day nursery, kindergarten	0.68	0.66	0.74	0.72	0.81
Running primary and secondary schools, education	0.66	0.57	0.65	0.67	0.76
Creation of jobs	0.57	0.58	0.59	0.61	0.67
Garbage collection, waste management	0.75	0.70	0.75	0.75	0.77
Utility services	0.53	0.51	0.57	0.57	0.63
Local public employment	0.79	0.77	0.81	0.85	0.87
Social assistance in cash	0.68	0.78	0.77	0.78	0.80

Source: OLA 2018

### 5.1. State versus local government, who should own public education institutions?

This question is intended to ask about the relationship between the competences of the state and the local government, and which solution seems to be more favourable to the

inhabitants of the municipalities. Of course, it is not just a question of asking people to formulate their views in general terms, but also of asking them to give their opinions on specific issues (tasks). First of all, on issues where there has been a recent ‘restructuring’ and the State has taken over (taken away) powers previously vested in local authorities. One such area was the running of public education establishments (Szüdi, s. a.; Forray & Kozma, 2013, p. 33).

We asked people whether they think that the maintenance and operation of public education institutions (kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools) should be the responsibility of the state, local authorities or churches and foundations. This question is not, in the opinion of the inhabitants of the municipalities, a point of reference for either those in favour or those against the changes imposed. A very similar proportion of respondents think that the maintenance and operation of public education establishments should be the responsibility of the state or local authorities, and only a few (one or two per cent) think that churches and foundations should have a maintenance and operation role in this area.

The equilibrium ratios observed at the national level do not vary significantly from *one municipality to another*. Residents of Budapest and municipalities are in full agreement, with a slightly higher proportion (48.4%) than average (58.4%) of residents of county capitals preferring the state, while a slightly higher proportion (49.8%) than average (55.3%) of residents of other cities preferring the municipalities as “owners”.

We found that here too, there are mainly regional differences, and less dependent on the personal parameters of the respondents. When looking at the question at a regional cross-sectional level, two regions stand out with a significantly higher proportion of respondents than the 81% average perceiving the role of politics as influential. One of the two regions is South Transdanubia (93.3%) and the other is Northern Hungary (95.7%). The social researcher is immediately struck by the fact that, on the one hand, a large proportion of the population in these regions live in small rural settlements and, on the other, the Roma population is over-represented in comparison with the overall proportion of the population in these settlements.

Table 23.

*Does the fact that the mayor of a municipality belongs to the governing party affect the development of the municipality – by region*

Region	Valid percentage
North Hungary	95.7
Southern Transdanubia	93.3
Western Transdanubia	81.1
ALL	81.0
Northern Great Plain	78.4
Central Hungary	77.8
Southern Great Plain	75.4
Central Transdanubia	73.1

Table 24.  
*Who should own the public education institutions (%)?*

	State	Local government	Churches, foundations
Country	48.4	49.8	1.8
Budapest	48.1	48.1	3.7
County seat	58.4	41.6	0.0
City	41.9	55.3	2.7
Municipality	49.8	49.4	0.8
Szeged	48.6	49.3	2.1

Source: OLA 2018; SLA 2018

By conducting a regional comparison, we found that the region of *Western Transdanubia* is again the furthest away from the relative similarity of the six regions: here, compared to the average (48%), a much higher proportion (71.1%) favours the state as the maintainer and operator of public education institutions. *In contrario*, this also means the lowest level of support for the role of local government (only 28.9% instead of 49.8%).

Do background variables create significant differences, i.e. do they disrupt the average equilibrium state? Neither gender, nor age, nor education, nor social status, nor participation activity have a differentiating effect.

On the whole, it seems that people at national level also see this issue as a pragmatic rather than a value-based, political-ideological issue.

## 5.2. The role of the mayor's government party in the development of the municipality (Tamás, 2014)

Let us treat as a sociological fact that the differential relation to redistributive power naturally affects the differential access to resources, regardless of the normative order of resource allocation and access to resources.<sup>10</sup> Since this relationship is not only a matter of knowledge leaking out of informal channels and forming a more or less coherent picture in the public's interest (see Almond, 1950), but is also present in the mediated public sphere, it is a particularly fascinating task to understand the public images that are associated with it.

<sup>10</sup> Recent national election campaigns have made it clear that local residents should take this into account when casting their votes. Partisanship in government is of particular importance in systems where the executive is highly personalised. A pro-government politician in a large rural town recently told the local media that the town had 'received' its new resources from the prime minister personally, and that the town council owed him a debt of gratitude.

Our question was: in your opinion, *does the fact that the mayor of a municipality belongs to the governing party affect the development of the municipality?* The picture is quite clear: four out of every five respondents think that the political affiliation of the mayor has an influence. In other words, municipal leadership is not just about coordinating local affairs, not just about dealing with policy issues, but also about managing the political context. The “mayor’s office” can thus be seen as a local political institution whose functioning is also a function of the ‘big political’ power structure.

Table 25.

*Does the fact that the mayor of a municipality belongs to the governing party influence its development?*

	Valid percentage
Yes, it affects	80.9
Not affected	19.1

Source: OLA 2018

The really fascinating question is whether there are substantive differences in the public’s perception of political influence. We found that here too there are mainly regional differences, less dependent on the personal parameters of the respondents.

Table 26.

*Does the fact that the mayor of a municipality belongs to the governing party affect the development of the municipality?*

Region	Valid percentage
North Hungary	95.7
Southern Transdanubia	93.3
Western Transdanubia	81.1
ALL	81.0
Northern Great Plain	78.4
Central Hungary	77.8
Southern Great Plain	75.4
Central Transdanubia	73.1

Source: OLA 2018

We also have county-level data, so we can see how the responses of people living in the counties of these two regions have evolved. But here again we run into the methodological limitations of using percentages because of the small number of cases per county. This should be borne in mind when considering the following county data, which exceed 90%.

Table 27.

*Does the fact that a municipality's mayor belongs to the governing party influence the development of a municipality – according to some high percentage counties*

Region	Percentage	Number of cases in relation to the number of elements in the subsample
North Hungary		
Heves	100.0	34–34
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	94.4	51–54
Nógrád	92.6	25–27
Southern Transdanubia		
Somogy	100.0	23–23
Tolna	91.3	21–23
Baranya	90.9	40–44
Other counties with high value		
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	95.7	44–46
Csongrád	90.2	37–41

Source: OLA 2018

However, it cannot be said that this high value – indicative of political influence – is a characteristic of small municipalities, since in the distribution of municipalities, although they have the highest value, they hardly differ from the value of county seats.

Table 28.

*Does the fact that the mayor of a municipality belongs to the governing party affect the development of the municipality – by type of settlement*

Municipal level	Valid percentage
Country	80.9
Budapest	74.6
County seat	83.7
City	79.2
Municipality	85.2
Szeged	88.1

Source: OLA 2018

When examining the perception of political influence by individual background characteristics, we found that only two groups of the population are close to 90%: those with the *highest social status* (88.1%) and those with “only voting” participation activity (88.4%). There is no function effect anywhere and, interestingly, even educational attainment shows no correlation with these perceptions.

## 6. Summary

In order to map the attitude of the population towards the municipalities, we have tried to take a “deliberative” approach. This means that before asking the respondents for an evaluation, we wanted to clarify their “competence background”. On the one hand, we wanted to know where they obtained their information (media, network, personal experience) and, on the other hand, what kind of participatory activity they were engaged in, i.e. whether they had already used any of the institutional forms that allow them to learn about local government (above all elections, the parliamentary reception, public hearings, citizens’ forums, council meetings). We felt that these two important background variables could help to explain the public’s awareness of local government (knowledge of the law, the scope of its tasks, the way it operates, the actors involved), their satisfaction and confidence and their perceptions of recent changes. The two schematic diagrams below illustrate how the survey was structured in this way.

The question is whether we have produced data that can only be interpreted in themselves – and then we have in fact only fulfilled the requirements of the genre that social research scepticism calls “factology”, “national book-keeping”, etc. – or whether our data point in a certain direction, raising the level of abstraction of the research results. We feel that, in many respects, we have succeeded in gaining insights that can be interpreted in a theoretical framework, that show definite social contexts and that require further explanation.

Interpretation of the measurement results includes the characteristics of the respondent population relevant to our topic. Our research has found that a) the Hungarian population has a relatively high level of awareness of the functioning of local government; in contrast, b) their level of participation is markedly low; and c) they have a moderately positive level of satisfaction and trust in local government. There is also a contextual factor, namely d) a shift in the relationship between the state and local government towards a weakening of local autonomy. These are therefore the underlying characteristics of the attitudes of the population we are examining in this study.

A specific pattern emerged as a result of these evaluative attitudes. Overall, it can be concluded that attitudes towards the functioning of local government are mainly influenced by territorial-local (region, county, type of municipality) factors, with only a very modest influence from the personal (socio-demographic, socio-cultural) characteristics of the respondents. This contradicts our expectations that age or education, for example, may play a more significant role in the perception of the functioning of local power. Instead of social fault lines, territorial fault lines differentiate population attitudes. To illustrate this, the role of local government in the development of local democracy was rated highest by graduates and lowest by the less educated, but the gap between them was only a quarter of that between regions and only a sixth of that between counties.

Since we are measuring attitudes, it is an exciting “discovery” that the role of personal characteristics in the formation of attitudes is subordinated to the “structural” (contextual) factor, i.e. the object of the attitude. Local realities dominate the perception of reality, not the perceptual positions of the perceivers. This would seem to call into question the explanatory power of the “social subjective reality” viewpoint.

First of all, we must note that the Hungarian population's level of awareness of local government is relatively high. Their primary sources of knowledge are the media (local newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet) and their personal network of contacts (their circle of acquaintances). A significant proportion (80–90%) are aware of the way in which the most important local government actors (mayor, councillor, notary) take office; they know who the legislator is in the case of the law (almost 80%) or the municipal decree (almost two-thirds); they know the mayor (over 80%) and even the political side supporting him (two-thirds). However, there is a difference in awareness; the “low point” is that very few people (just under 50%) know their local councillor.

The level of public participation is particularly low. Not even half of the population took part in the last municipal elections, and only a fraction (a few percent) took advantage of one of the institutional opportunities to learn about the tasks and functioning of the municipality (reception hours for representatives, public hearings, citizens' forums, council meetings).

There is no legitimacy deficit: even on the eve of the next elections, local governments have the support of the majority of the population, expressed in a moderately positive level of satisfaction with their work and confidence in them.

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