

# Empirical Research in the Field of Local Governments of Csongrád County<sup>1</sup>

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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 system parted with its historic past preceding the socialist council system of 1950. While some post-socialist countries opted for the federal or integrated model of local governance, the Hungarian law on local governance adopted the principle of *one municipality, one local authority*.<sup>2</sup> In the grace period of the ‘democratic euphoria’ that could even be sensed in various other fields<sup>3</sup> at the time of the regime change, legislation fully enforcing the notion of local governance could be passed. It revealed legislative self-restraint often much missed nowadays, allowing local powers to grow even to the detriment of central ones. It soon became evident, however, that this low-functioning and fragmented system would not produce a perfect solution. The regulatory model necessarily contained a range of problematic points<sup>4</sup> which could have long provided a basis for a fine-tuning of the local government system, if not a reform. However, the proposed transformation lacked political consensus and a two-thirds majority needed for amendment. Consequently, the local government system could dwell in peace. Other post-socialist countries, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, had the opportunity to keep fine-tuning their elected models and make any necessary adjustments where needed. The Hungarian

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2 HORVÁTH 2015, 33.

3 It suffices to refer to the university student government system, which represents a quite influential and untouchable structure compared to Western European models.

4 VEREBÉLYI 2000, 320.

local government system, however, could not be made more efficient and could only attract criticism. Used as a European catchphrase, the establishment of regions was doomed to fail after it had become clear their lack would not hinder drawing EU development resources.

In the grace period mentioned above, a myriad of possibilities presented themselves for newly-formed democracies to satisfy their constitutional right to self-governance by adopting a model proven in Western societies, determining the relationship between the State and local governments. Although such a model has undergone changes since then, its basis was loud and clear even in 1990.

The classification of European local governments was subject to research published in the 1980s, known to Hungarian researchers, as well. The typology by Page and Goldsmith based on the division of functions and the autonomy of local governments only includes the Nordic and Southern European systems. However, the models referred to provide a detailed description of the solutions that make up the classification. While the Nordic model is elucidated with the presentation of the local government systems of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom, the Southern solution is rendered more comprehensible by presenting those of France, Italy and Spain.<sup>5</sup> Later in one of his books, Page reveals what he considers the most important aspect in separating the Nordic and Southern types of local government systems. While Nordic systems are characterised by legal localism with political centralism, southern ones are marked by legal centralism with political localism. The author created his typology based on the extent of the political influence and the legal effect the local elite can exert through formal legislation on the decision-making processes that determine local issues.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the 1990s, the typology became more complex. For instance, Hesse and Sharpe distinguished three models, namely, the Anglo–Saxon one, the Middle and Northern European one as distinguished from the Napoleonic tradition,<sup>7</sup> only to allow for establishing and fine-tuning further classification models to date. Determined by Loughlin in 2003<sup>8</sup> and extended in 2010 to include Eastern European countries, a new model now comprises four groups: The French, the Anglo–Saxon, the German and the Nordic models.

Apparently, various options were available for Eastern European countries departing from their single-party systems in order to adopt their own public administrative and local government systems. Their choice had not been supported by historic traditions, but by the professional information obtained by political figures frenzied for being westernised coupled with varied ideological convictions.

5 PAGE–GOLDSMITH 1987, 192.

6 PAGE 1991, 186.

7 HESSE 1991, 603–621.

8 LOUGHLIN 2003, 436.

The resulting Hungarian local government system provided the greatest possible liberty for municipalities with an independent budget, a municipality council, a mayor and extensive regulatory powers, regardless of the size and number of inhabitants. In comparison with other Western European countries in a functional and economic sense, the system also constituted some immensely decentralised *modus operandi*.<sup>9</sup> A brief excursion to a comparative study is called for to explain the situation. The study was carried out in 2014 and provides an analysis of the pre-2010 Hungarian system in a bid to perform a comprehensive analysis of local government systems in Eastern Europe in a broader sense.<sup>10</sup>

According to Pawel Swianiewicz, the Eastern European Bloc no doubt constitutes a group with specific characteristics. This is mostly because these countries share a common historical fact: They all underwent a period of transformation from a single-party system into democracy at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most significant common aspects are seen by the author to manifest themselves in the unshakeable belief in decentralisation, the frailty of mid-level local governments and the specific timing of decentralisation reforms which also predetermined them.

The regime changer countries were characterised by the general conviction that democracy was inherently linked to an ever-greater level of decentralisation and that newly-formed local governments were capable of supplementing any formerly lacking elements of democracy including civil society. The explanation for the weakness of mid-level local governments is also derived from a shared past, since communist regimes had a tendency to quash local settlements at this level.<sup>11</sup> It was this traumatic memory that led to set post-socialist local government reformers off in a direction opposing the one taken by Western European trends.

Apart from the main commonalities, Swianiewicz also mentions specificities which, compared to initial similarities and differences, provide testimonials of the Eastern Bloc's ability to show extraordinary versatility in the more than 20-year-old period following the regime change.

In the field of functional decentralisation, the countries making up this group are characterised by a lower level of decentralisation as opposed to the Nordic and German systems. However, countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Latvia precedes the Anglo-Saxon and Southern type countries in this sense.

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9 For the explanation of how it was possible for post-communist regimes establishing the institutional framework of local governments to move on from the formerly rigid Western European traditions that were about to change, see CAMPBELL-COULSON 2006, 543–561.

10 SWIANIEWICZ 2014, 292–311.

11 SWIANIEWICZ 2014, 295.

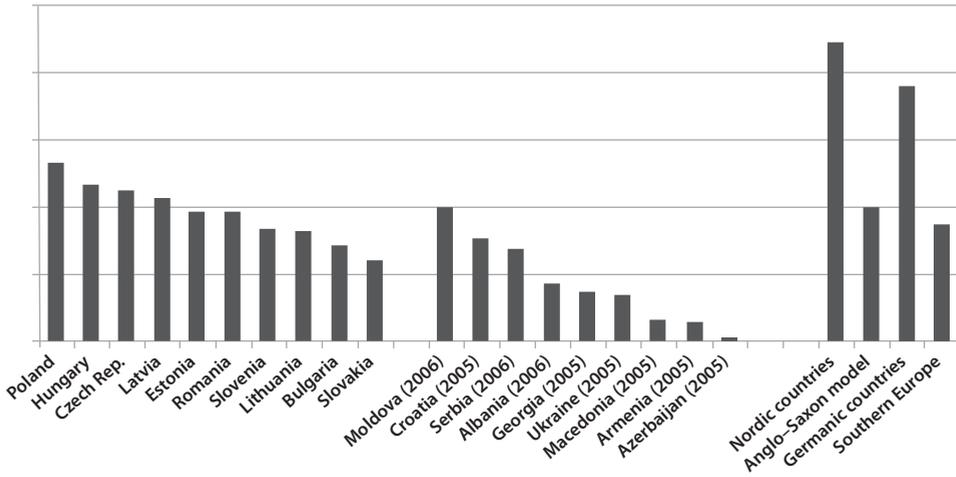


Figure 1. Functional decentralisation in Central and Eastern Europe – local government spending as a percentage of GDP (2007)

Source: Swianiewicz 2014, 295.

As for territorial organisation, all detectable radical differences from Western European countries in case of post-socialist countries are absent. Countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are classified to have the most fragmented systems, while countries like Lithuania, Georgia, Serbia and Bulgaria are regarded as having created the most sizeable local governments.

As far as the local government management style is concerned, diversity seems the most opportune expression. There are countries which have been electing mayors directly since the regime change or those where a mayor elected by a power having obtained majority in the council manages the municipality. Also, there are countries such as Hungary that also brought about a regime change in this sense in the period under review here.

Taking these specificities into account, the author attempted to build a typology of Eastern European countries dividing them into five clusters. The first includes countries that can be most likened to Western European systems due to the wide scope of their functions. As a result of the direct election of mayors,<sup>12</sup> the economic autonomy of local governments and the similarities of the middle level of local government systems, the author groups Hungary, Poland and Slovakia into the first category as “the champions of decentralisation”. Countries that only achieved relative decentralisation including the Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia are grouped into the second cluster. The third cluster comprises the Balkans: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia and the Ukraine. Due to their territorial

<sup>12</sup> The system has been up and running since 1990 in Slovakia, 1994 in Hungary and 2002 in Poland.

peculiarities, the fourth group is made up of Georgia, Lithuania and Serbia. The final fifth cluster was devised according to a strong territorial fragmentation coupled with a high-level centralisation including Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>13</sup>

*Table 1. Results of typology – summary*

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Type V
Number of tiers of elected local governments	2–3	1–2	1–2	1–2	1
Territorial fragmentation of the municipal tier	Diversified (consolidation in Poland, small municipalities in Hungary and Slovakia)	Small municipalities	Moderate	Very big local government units	Small municipalities
Functional decentralisation (mean share of local spending in GDP – 2007*)	Wide scope of functions (10.5% of GDP)	Wide scope of functions (10.5% of GDP)	Moderate (6.6% of GDP)	Moderate (6.3% of GDP)	Narrow scope of functions (0.9% of GDP)
Financial decentralisation – mean share of locally controlled fees and taxes in GDP (2007*)	Considerable (3.1%)	Small (0.7%)	Small (0.8%)	Considerable (3.1%)	Negligible (0.1%)
Allocation of grant transfers	Based on the formula	Based on the formula	Partially based on the formula	Diversified	Major role of arbitrary decisions of central level politicians and bureaucrats
Local dept as % of GDP (2007*)	2.3%	2.8%	0.4%	0.6%	0%
Position of the mayor/type of leadership	Strong mayor, direct elections	Collective leadership	Strong mayor, direct elections	Collective leadership	Diversified
Council – electoral system	Majoritarian in small, proportional (or mixed) in the biggest municipalities	Proportional	Proportional	Proportional	Majoritarian
Countries	Hungary, Poland, Slovakia	Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia	Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Ukraine	Georgia, Lithuania, Serbia	Armenia, Azerbaijan

*Note: \*Except for 2006 for Albania, Moldova, Serbia and 2005 for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia and Ukraine.*

*Source: Swianiewicz 2014, 306.*

13 SWIANIEWICZ 2014, 306.

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. This provided a sociologically fertile ground to establish an idiosyncratic local social elite. It is appropriate to quote an interview excerpt here from the research conducted by Imre Pászka on the Southern Hungarian Csongrád county elite. It provides a nice rendering of the phenomenon and outweighs any statistically collected data:

“Regarding the question of who the political elite is, one can see obviously that in a minor municipality of 5,500 inhabitants it is the local government that controls the life of the municipality. It is a body of 13 members in addition to the mayor and the notary. They are primarily concerned with determining the life of the municipality. Therefore, part of the political elite is the controlling authority here, the local government. One can call them by this name because they are what they are. In a settlement smaller than Mórahalom the issue becomes more acute because it is obvious that the elite there weighs even less in the balance. Who is the elite here, then? Obviously, they are those who work at the local government, those helping their work and those who contribute to the building of the town or village in terms of either financing or simply being party members or representing the interests of Mórahalom in another municipality.”<sup>14</sup>

The specificities of the Hungarian electoral system have also contributed to the establishment and fortification of the local power elite, since the system of county-level electoral lists and the often double role played by mayors also being members of the party political elite (in both mayor and Member of Parliament capacities) have resulted in making the local positions of power even more influential.

If examined from the perspective of the elite, the reforms adopted after 2010 may be viewed as a grave prestige loss of local government positions. The forcible assumption of power and centralisation supplemented with the eradication of county lists and the non-eligibility of mayors as MPs have resulted in a significant weakening of local centres of power or so-called oligarchies in fiefdom.

The main precondition of the change was due to the success of a quite strong mandate conferred upon a political bloc during the 2010 parliamentary elections. Wielding constitutional power, the winning bloc was able to initiate considerable reforms in various fields. Proving the appropriateness of the reforms posed no difficulty, since the ongoing rhetoric on the indebtedness of local governments would have proven a valid argument even if a number of experts in the field had not previously drawn attention to other fallacies of the existing system. Similarly to the restructuring of court administration, one could cherry-pick former works by authors who would have proven difficult to be insinuated with excessively unswerving loyalty towards the government. Apart from other structural problems, the economic crisis at the end of the 2000s undoubtedly led to the indebtedness of some local governments.

14 PÁSZKA 2010, 156.

Although this was not considered a general phenomenon and it was only true in case of county-level self-governments in addition to local governments taking out considerable loans and carrying out uncontrolled management, it nevertheless provided an appropriate basis for general intervention.

What the indebtedness of local governments meant on the European scene in proportional terms is accurately shown by the data published by Eurostat.<sup>15</sup>

*Table 2. Local government debt*

	Local government debt as per cent of total local revenues (all tiers combined)			
	2008	2009	2010	
<b>Spain</b>	169.7	182.5	Over 220	↑↑
<b>Germany</b>	153.0	171.7	187.4	↑
<b>Turkey</b>	120.8	126.0	127.0	↑
<b>Ireland</b>	100.0	114.0		↑
<b>Sweden</b>	46.3	50.5	45.8	
<b>Latvia</b>	39.7	57.0	62.0	↑↑
<b>Estonia</b>	37.7	45.9	44.8	↑
<b>Hungary</b>	32.2	36.6	43.3	↑
<b>Croatia</b>	29.1	32.2	30.2	
<b>Denmark</b>	29.3	29.3		
<b>Slovakia</b>	26.7	31.8	38.4	↑↑
<b>Czech Republic</b>	24.5	26.2	24.7	
<b>Finland</b>	22.4	23.8	23.2	
<b>Romania</b>	21.8	26.0	27.1	↑↑
<b>Poland</b>	20.3	26.0	33.8	↑↑
<b>Slovenia</b>	15.9	22.4	25.4	↑↑
<b>Moldova</b>	6.4	5.0	4.0	
<b>Russia</b>	6.1	7.6	8.0	↑
<b>Bulgaria</b>	2.7	6.2	6.5	↑↑
<b>Serbia</b>	0.0	0.0	30.6	↑↑

*Source: Country observers.*

<sup>15</sup> DAVEY 2011, 53–57.

Table 3. Local government debt as per cent of GDP

	2007	2008	2009	2010	increase in crisis 2010/08 (per cent)
Norway	9.6	9.8	11.7	12.6	29
Netherlands	7.1	7.3	8.0	8.4	15
France	7.2	7.5	8.2	8.3	11
Italy	8.0	8.1	8.6	8.3	2
Denmark	6.3	6.6	7.3	7.2	9
Finland	5.3	5.4	6.6	6.6	22
Latvia	3.3	4.1	5.8	6.4	56
Euro area (16 countries)	5.5	5.6	6.1	6.1	9
EU (27 countries)	5.1	5.1	5.7	5.8	14
Sweden	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.6	2
Portugal	4.2	4.5	5.1	5.2	16
Germany	4.9	4.8	5.2	5.2	8
Belgium	5.0	4.8	4.8	5.1	6
United Kingdom	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.9	4
Hungary	3.1	3.9	4.1	4.6	18
Poland	2.2	2.3	3.0	3.9	70
Estonia	2.7	3.2	4.0	3.7	16
Ireland	2.5	3.0	3.6	3.6	20
Spain	2.8	2.9	3.3	3.3	14
Austria	1.9	1.9	2.3	2.8	47
Slovakia	1.8	1.9	2.4	2.7	42
Czech Republic	2.5	2.5	2.7	2.6	4
Romania	1.7	1.9	2.3	2.4	26
Luxemburg	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.3	5
Cyprus	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.0	5
Slovenia	0.7	0.9	1.5	1.7	89
Lithuania	1.0	1.2	1.6	1.6	33
Bulgaria	0.6	0.6	1.0	1.2	100
Greece	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	13
Iceland	4.8	7.6	9.4		
Croatia	0.5	0.6	0.6		
Turkey	0.4	0.6	0.8		

Source: Eurostat

These charts show quite accurately that the extent of local government debt was not exceptionally high at the onset of the economic crisis. However, one could see a significant rise in debt compared to countries such as the Czech Republic or Croatia during the two-year crisis. Between 2002 and 2011 an almost six-fold increase in the Hungarian local government debt took place.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison with state debt, however, the rate of indebtedness of local governments appeared relatively modest. Relying on these data, Tamás M. Horváth reached the conclusion that “the emergence of any crisis situation was generally false and the unavoidability of government intervention would only serve a smooth restructuring”.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, it is also a fact that settling local government management issues has always been on the respective state government’s agenda since the regime change. The original idea was about a local government system of business endeavours. This scheme would allow villages, towns and cities to exercise considerable freedom in supplementing state revenues with business services. Mayors that were often elected from the pool of former council heads or school headmasters and the local government apparatus set up by them did not generally have entrepreneurial knowledge or practice. Among other reasons, this alone presaged a financial crisis situation. Regulations were made more stringent back in 1995,<sup>18</sup> which manifested in passing legislation on debt settlement<sup>19</sup> to prevent functioning disabilities of the local governments in question. Pursuant to this law, debt relief procedures took place in some 60 instances in the 1996–2003 period regarding smaller municipalities. The steep rise in such procedures was undoubtedly triggered by the economic crisis beginning in 2008.

Debt consolidation took place in four stages between 2012 and 2014 and the Hungarian State took over more than HUF 1,300 billion of debt from county-level and local governments.<sup>20</sup>

Debt consolidation, however, came with a price of limiting the economic autonomy of local governments.<sup>21</sup> (Taking only one example, a shift from access to financing to task financing resulted in a massive reduction of local government business management freedom. Local governments were barred from free disposal of their financial means contrary to what it used to be the case.)

The actual debt consolidation, however, was preceded by a significant amount of legislation the main stages of which are set out below.

The Fundamental Law of Hungary does not yield inferences to be made easily when referring to a public administrative or local governmental regime change, since

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16 GYIRÁN 2013, 109.

17 HORVÁTH 2015, 213.

18 Act No. CXXI of 1995.

19 Act No. XXXV of 1996.

20 Helyi önkormányzati adóssághozsokozáció (2012–2014) 2013.

21 Taking over county debt also resulted in county-level self-government property being transformed into state property free of charge.

the basics were left unaltered. Setting out at a constitutional level that “the territory of Hungary shall consist of the capital, counties, cities and towns, as well as villages” and that “the capital, as well as the cities and towns may be divided into districts” does not forebode much of a change.

The Fundamental Law boasts with elements that provide straight answers to the defects revealed above in connection with the functioning of local governments. However, they leave more unanswered questions than answered ones for subsequent legislation. For example, the constitution confers the right upon local governments to associate with other local governments with the proviso that an Act may provide that mandatory tasks of local governments shall be performed through such associations.<sup>22</sup>

Some view the text of the Fundamental Law as encroaching upon local governmental autonomy.<sup>23</sup> However, it must be underscored that the local government system does not simply become a stronghold for democracy and a democratic counterpoint against state power only because local governance is guaranteed as a basic right in the constitution.

Even the European Charter of Local Self-Government<sup>24</sup> does not prescribe such an obligation. Article 2 of the Charter provides that “the principle of local self-government shall be recognised in domestic legislation and, where practicable, in the constitution”, which is satisfied by Article 31(1) of the Hungarian Fundamental Law.

What is far more important is what kind of institutional structure with what kind of functions is guaranteed and to what extent autonomy was ensured by the state when it determined the legislative framework for the functioning of local governments.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from a symbolic level, a Cardinal Act (adopted by a two-thirds majority) does not differ much from a constitutional-level legislative text. In addition, the system of local governments was basically set out in this way by the Hungarian National Assembly. Therefore, it is more appropriate to place emphasis on the latter source of law when analysing the enforcement of the right to self-governance in addition to concluding a weakening of constitutional protection.

The restructuring of the local government system is provided for by various Cardinal Acts in addition to the Fundamental Law. Act No. CXCVI of 2011 on national wealth is an important source of law which provides that carrying out any public service determined by an Act are hereinafter classified as within the exclusive responsibility of the state.

22 Articles 32(1)(k) and 34(2) of the Fundamental Law.

23 PÁLNÉ KOVÁCS 2016, 588; BALÁZS 2012, 37–41. For the apologetic arguments see PATYI 2013, 379–395.

24 The 1985 Charter was implemented into the Hungarian national law by Act No. XV of 1997.

25 The wording of the previous Constitution was naturally a strong guarantee of the fragmented local government system. “Eligible voters of the communities, cities, the capital and its districts, and the counties have the right to local government. Local government refers to independent, democratic management of local affairs and the exercise of local public authority in the interests of the local population.” (Article 42 of the 1949 Constitution.) The omission of this provision from the Fundamental Law could not have been a mere coincidence.

However, the basis for the new system is laid down by the Act on the local governments of Hungary<sup>26</sup> the most essential element of which is what it does not even provide for. Unlike the former Act on local governments, this Act, without even mentioning local governments, assumes control of segments of the distribution system which formerly symbolised the very existence and functioning of local governments. The state does not confer the actual operation of primary and secondary education, professional healthcare and cultural institutions upon local or county-level self-governments, but it carries them out under central management.

(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 itself. The reorganisation of territorial public administration was the first series of measures which allowed to make inferences about the public administration system and the forthcoming centralisation of local governments. The majority of deconcentrated county-level administrative offices were merged into government agencies upon which the district office system could be built later.<sup>27</sup> This change, effective as of 2012, had a serious effect on local governments, since the district offices assumed powers from notaries, which reduced the number of officials by a third.<sup>28</sup>)

Beyond doubt, the most serious blow to local (and, in part, territorial) governments arrived with the above change, since determining the fate of important institutions for towns and villages as well as the participants symbolising these institutions were removed from their powers. The employment of school teachers, headmasters or even doctors who were playing a major role in the life of smaller municipalities was no longer the responsibility of the local government, but that of the state. The mayor who won the elections thanks to their efforts in the development of healthcare and education facilities were appalled (and somewhat relieved) to learn that they would only be “guardians” of the facility at best, but they no longer played a decisive role in

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26 Act No. CLXXXIX of 2011 on the local governments of Hungary.

27 Act No. XCIII of 2012.

28 Here is a list of task and powers assumed by district offices: Tasks related to the Office of Government Issued Documents: registry of addresses, issuance of identification documents, passport administration, registry of vehicles, specific guardianship and child welfare services, specific social administrative services, such as elderly benefit and guaranteed care allowance, public educational tasks, asylum cases, sole proprietorship activities and their permitting, specific communal matters such as cemetery establishment permissions, specific veterinary hygiene-related tasks such as permission for animal shelters, circus menagerie, misdemeanours and administrative offences, management of local protection committees, specific water management-related tasks, construction monitoring and certain local planning authority-related tasks.

*Here is a list of tasks and powers still assumed by the notary:* Actio negatoria (where the owner of the immovable property is granted the right to be left free from interference), estate settlement, administration relating to civil status, tax administration and local taxes, specific planning authority-related tasks, permission of trade, ragweed eradication tasks on urban land, industrial administration, social welfare benefits subject to local government decree, ex aequo et bono care allowance and public medical care (both of which were supplanted with municipal benefits as of 1 March 2015), child care benefits and the supervision of local livestock production regulation enforcement.

the everyday life of the school or hospital they had helped develop. The appointment of school headmasters or, in larger municipalities, that of hospital directors counted among the ceremonial and often politically heated acts of a local government. Appointees were to be living up to the expectations of the local government leadership and, by extension, the local citizenry. If one strips the situation of other aspects and considers it in terms of plunder as it was done by Lajos Csörgits in his study, this change put the method of plunder in a wholly different dimension of power.<sup>29</sup>

In comparison, any other change effected by the law on Hungarian local governments might seem marginal. Whether it be about the further weakening of county-level self-governments, the introduction of “single-task administration”, the transformation of the notary’s status<sup>30</sup> and the legality review system or the above-mentioned amendments to financing, the reform element most easily comprehensible for municipalities and their population in the long run remained as it was described above. The main argument underlying nationalisation (the eradication of differences in educational and healthcare conditions) may have seemed a rational measure in the eyes of many; however, it was not nearly enough to alleviate the pain over the loss of local influence. What is more, the fear that a remote decision-maker can place a facility manager unknown by or unpopular with the population on the top management level of the municipality proved to be founded quite quickly in many cases.<sup>31</sup> The nationalisation of schools which often do more than providing basic education for pupils and students,<sup>32</sup> and that of other institutions coupled with powers relayed by district offices<sup>33</sup> have indeed resulted in the model change in Hungary as it had been predicted by Ilona Pálné Kovács.<sup>34</sup> If one takes the typology created by Pawel Swianiewicz, it can be predicted on the basis of radical centralisation that in case of a fresh classification, Hungary may well be moved from the first cluster to share the fifth one with Azerbaijan and Armenia due to functional centralisation with continued considerable territorial fragmentation.

Thanks to the adaptability of Hungarian local governments and the elements of the centralisation measures seemingly popular with the population (see, for example, the system of the Government Customer Service), the new model appears to be stabilising without any particular upheavals.

Therefore, having recovered from the abrupt shock following every radical transformation, one may be presented with the opportunity to make an attempt,

29 CSÖRGITS 2011, 129–145.

30 A detailed analysis is found in CSÖRGITS 2013.

31 See for example the debate surrounding the 2014 school headmaster’s appointment in Sándorfalva, Csongrád county, Southern Hungary. ARANY 2014.

32 See [www.arop.rkk.hu](http://www.arop.rkk.hu) Government project ÁROP entitled *Helyi közszolgáltatások versenyképességet szolgáló modernizálása* No. ÁROP-1.1.22-2012-2012-0001. Project manager: Ilona Pálné Kovács, Budapest, MTA KRTK Institute for Regional Research 2013. Available: <http://arop.rkk.hu/> (Downloaded: 31.05.2018.)

33 HORVÁTH–JÓZSA 2016, 572.

34 PÁLNÉ KOVÁCS 2016.

using quantitative and qualitative means, to reveal how local governments and their population relate to the above changes.

Based on earlier discussions with local government officials, the hypothesis of the research group was that the considerable reduction in local government powers had not reached due public awareness in the past 5 years, either, and that the local population still assumed an omnipotent self-government system. It was surmised that the amendments to Act No. CLXXXIX of 2011 might only be perceived from answers provided by the local population, in varying degrees depending on settlement size, if the institutional link was clearly visible for citizens when having recourse to specific services. Therefore, the assumption was made that local public employment was regarded more as a state than a local government responsibility especially in smaller communities.

What follows is a description of the interim conclusions of the quantitative research reflecting the views taken by the local population on local self-government reforms. The research group was first and foremost interested in to what extent these amended local government powers became part of public awareness. By local population standards, what tasks are thought to be local government, state or joint responsibilities? This issue was presented by the research group in two pieces of empirical research.

1. With a view to analysing the Hungarian self-government system, a questionnaire was developed in which questions related to the examination of the above problem were also raised. Due, however, to limited financial opportunities and in order to ensure representativity, a decision was taken in favour of an omnibus survey which was conducted by an opinion pollster, Szonda Ipsos, a member of the Ipsos Group.

The professional content of data collection was determined to consider the country's adult citizenry as the population with an allotted minimum sample size of 1,000 persons. Regarding the key sociological parameters such as gender, age and education, the sample is representative of the country's adult population. In addition to providing the estimated margin of tolerance, it was also requested that the query should be in the form of a personal (PAPI or CAPI) interview.

2. Apart from the nationwide research undertaken by Szonda Ipsos, the research team was presented with the opportunity to discern information from the views and opinions of the people dwelling in Szeged, South Hungary, about their local government based on a yearly local population query.

The query of the Szeged citizenry was conducted as part of the research known as "Szeged Studies" that had been underway for decades, using a representative sample containing 1,000 citizens over 18 years of age permanently domiciled in Szeged according to gender, age, educational attainment level and electoral district. During the 2018 query, the questionnaire was supplemented with questions examining the relationship between local governments and the local population.

The objective of the query was to make an estimate of the extent to which public safety, public transport, environmental care, the road network, the sewerage system, public lighting, healthcare, crèche and pre-school care, primary and secondary education, creation of new employment, refuse collection, public utility services, local public employment and welfare cash benefits are thought to be within the bounds of local government responsibilities and issues of liability. The tables presented below clearly demonstrate in percentage which of these responsibilities the local population regards as purely local governmental or purely state responsibilities and which ones are regarded as local governmental responsibilities only in part.

The interim conclusions of the research are summarised in the tables below:

*Table 4. Concluding question 1*

**Q1\_1 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: providing public safety?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	95	9.5	9.8	9.8
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	395	39.5	40.8	50.6
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	479	47.9	49.4	100.0
	Total	969	96.9	100.0	
Missing	DA	7	.7		
	DK	24	2.4		
	Total	31	3.1		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

Table 5. Concluding question 2

**Q1\_2 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: organising public transport?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	147	14.7	15.2	15.2
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	332	33.2	34.3	49.5
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	489	48.9	50.5	100.0
	Total	968	96.8	100.0	
Missing	DA	7	.7		
	DK	25	2.5		
	Total	32	3.2		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 6. Concluding question 3

**Q1\_3 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: environmental care and providing public hygiene?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	55	5.5	5.7	5.7
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	259	25.9	26.8	32.5
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	654	65.4	67.5	100.0
	Total	969	96.9	100.0	
Missing	DA	10	1.0		
	DK	21	2.1		
	Total	31	3.1		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 7. Concluding question 4

**Q1\_4 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: construction and maintenance of the road network?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	115	11.5	11.8	11.8
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	413	41.3	42.6	54.4
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	443	44.3	45.6	100.0
	Total	971	97.1	100.0	
Missing	DA	8	.8		
	DK	21	2.1		
	Total	29	2.9		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

Table 8. Concluding question 5

**Q1\_5 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: construction and maintenance of the sewerage system?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	108	10.8	11.2	11.2
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	337	33.7	34.9	46.1
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	522	52.2	53.9	100.0
	Total	967	96.7	100.0	
Missing	DA	12	1.2		
	DK	21	2.1		
	Total	33	3.3		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

Table 9. Concluding question 6

**Q1\_6 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: providing public lighting?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	107	10.7	11.0	11.0
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	287	28.7	29.5	40.5
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	580	58.0	59.5	100.0
	Total	975	97.5	100.0	
Missing	DA	6	.6		
	DK	19	1.9		
	Total	25	2.5		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 10. Concluding question 7

**Q1\_7 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: providing healthcare?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	144	14.4	14.9	14.9
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	366	36.6	37.8	52.7
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	458	45.8	47.3	100.0
	Total	968	96.8	100.0	
Missing	DA	9	.9		
	DK	23	2.3		
	Total	32	3.2		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 11. Concluding question 8

**Q1\_8 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: providing crèche and pre-school care?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	72	7.2	7.4	7.4
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	332	33.2	34.1	41.6
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	568	56.8	58.4	100.0
	Total	971	97.1	100.0	
Missing	DA	9	.9		
	DK	20	2.0		
	Total	29	2.9		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

Table 12. Concluding question 9

**Q1\_9 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: operating primary and secondary schools and providing education?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	102	10.2	10.6	10.6
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	395	39.5	40.9	51.5
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	470	47.0	48.5	100.0
	Total	967	96.7	100.0	
Missing	DA	10	1.0		
	DK	22	2.2		
	Total	33	3.3		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

Table 13. Concluding question 10

**Q1\_10 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: creating new employment?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	156	15.6	16.1	16.1
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	413	41.3	42.7	58.8
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	399	39.9	41.2	100.0
	Total	969	96.9	100.0	
Missing	DA	9	.9		
	DK	22	2.2		
	Total	31	3.1		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 14. Concluding question 11

**Q1\_11 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: organising refuse removal and waste management?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	106	10.6	11.0	11.0
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	269	26.9	27.8	38.8
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	592	59.2	61.2	100.0
	Total	968	96.8	100.0	
Missing	DA	10	1.0		
	DK	22	2.2		
	Total	32	3.2		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 15. Concluding question 12

**Q1\_12 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: providing public utility services (electricity, drinking water and natural gas) for households?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	243	24.3	25.1	25.1
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	318	31.8	32.8	57.9
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	407	40.7	42.1	100.0
	Total	968	96.8	100.0	
Missing	DA	9	.9		
	DK	23	2.3		
	Total	32	3.2		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 16. Concluding question 13

**Q1\_13 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: local public employment?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	41	4.1	4.3	4.3
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	241	24.1	24.9	29.2
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	684	68.4	70.8	100.0
	Total	966	96.6	100.0	
Missing	DA	12	1.2		
	DK	22	2.2		
	Total	34	3.4		
Total		1,000	100.0		

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 17. Concluding question 14

**Q1\_14 Q1. Which of the responsibilities listed below do you think fall within the scope of the local government: welfare cash benefits?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. It is not a local government responsibility	64	6.4	6.6	6.6
	2. It is a local government responsibility only in part	295	29.5	30.6	37.2
	3. Yes, it is a local government responsibility	606	60.6	62.8	100.0
	Total	964	96.4	100.0	
Missing	DA	11	1.1		
	DK	25	2.5		
	Total	36	3.6		
Total		1,000	100.0		

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

An issue of methodology arises when evaluating the data contained in these tables. Even the members of the research group were intrigued by this issue when they worded the above questions. Consideration had been given to a choice between two ways of asking them: Whether citizens, who mostly obtain information from the media, should be tested on their knowledge based on media-friendly concepts or competence issues that had become more widely known. For example, it would have been a great opportunity in the section dealing with primary and secondary schools to mention the key word “KLIK”, a government organisation of supervising state-run primary and secondary schools, in order to contrast the role and weight of this state authority with the almost non-existent responsibilities of local governments concerning these schools. Similarly, regarding healthcare, the question could have been framed to expressly include whether it was the government or the local government that decided on the appointment of the local hospital administrator. Since, according to the research group members, these forms of question framing would have caused further methodological issues due, among others, to the difficulty of separating legal requirements and political influence, a decision was made to use general wording in the categories to elicit the extent to which the local population regarded a task purely state, purely local government or perhaps a joint responsibility in exercising a specific function.

Basically, the research group was interested in whether the radical reduction in the number of the functional responsibilities of local governments reached due public

awareness. Although this study is limited to a partial evaluation of the collected data and fails to include the qualitative research findings by the research group, the research hypothesis seems to have been confirmed based merely on these available data.

From reading the tables it may be established that the majority of the functions and services concerning the everyday lives of citizens is referred to the exclusive scope of responsibility of the local governments by a significant share of the local population. Even in case of a long-established state responsibility, findings of astonishing degree are revealed, in which state involvement is almost exclusive. For instance, the provision of public safety is regarded as a state responsibility by only 10 percent of the local population, while it is regarded as a local governmental responsibility by almost 50 percent of the same population. In the politically saturated and media-friendly topic of public education, the nationwide survey findings are also quite surprising, where an almost 50 percent rate regards the operation and maintenance of schools as an exclusive local government responsibility. However, another hypothesis was also confirmed according to which a higher rate of “convenient” answers are likely to be received in areas where the relationship between the institution providing a service and the citizen is direct when a certain care is provided. Public employment or welfare cash benefits are only regarded by an insignificant share of the local population as state responsibilities. In connection with public employment, some 70 percent of those providing an answer think that it is exclusively a local governmental responsibility.

If the national data are compared to the findings confirmed in Szeged, the seat of Csongrád County, in sum, it may be established that considerable differences between the national and local findings may only be perceived in a few cases.

**Q2 Q2. At the beginning of each year, a municipality is to formulate a plan for where to allocate funds available for the management and development of the municipality. Who or what body do you think is entitled to decide in this issue?**

**0.0 – it is not a local government responsibility**

**0.5 – it is a local government responsibility in part**

**1.0 – yes, it is a local government responsibility**

*Table 18. The question of fund allocation. National–local comparative data*

	<b>Country</b>	<b>Szeged</b>
Local public employment	<b>0.83</b>	<b>0.87</b>
Environmental care and providing public hygiene	<b>0.81</b>	<b>0.89</b>
Welfare cash benefits	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.72</b>
Providing crèche and pre-school care	<b>0.76</b>	<b>0.78</b>
Organising refuse removal and waste management	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.83</b>
Providing public lighting	<b>0.74</b>	<b>0.85</b>
Construction and maintenance of the sewerage system	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.78</b>
Providing public safety	<b>0.70</b>	<b>0.72</b>
Operating primary and secondary schools and providing education	<b>0.69</b>	<b>0.65</b>
Organising public transport	<b>0.68</b>	<b>0.88</b>
Construction and maintenance of the road network	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.71</b>
Providing healthcare	<b>0.66</b>	<b>0.57</b>
Creating new employment	<b>0.63</b>	<b>0.60</b>
Providing public utility services (electricity, drinking water and natural gas) for households	<b>0.59</b>	<b>0.63</b>

*Source: Compiled by the author.*

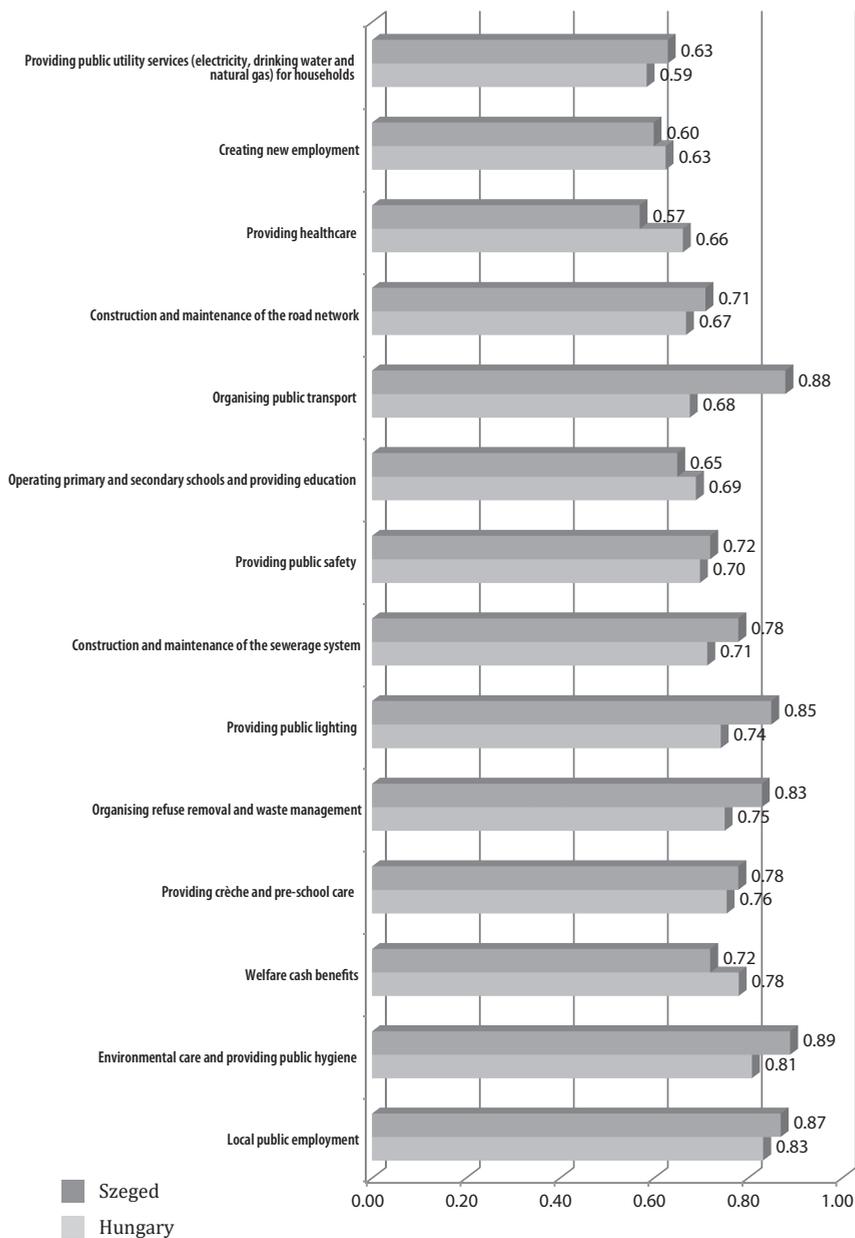


Figure 2. The question of fund allocation. National–local comparative data  
Source: Compiled by the author.

Interpreting the task of organising public transport as a local government responsibility depends greatly on the municipality level. Therefore, the huge disparity between the Szeged and national data is in fact merely illusory.

Szeged is a county seat where the index value (collecting values between 0 and 1) is 0.88. This value differs from the national value of 0.68; however, if national data are viewed at differing municipality levels, it may be discerned that the Szeged value essentially coincides with the 0.85 value of other county seats.

As the table below shows, the lower the municipality level is, the more the local population tends to interpret organising public transport as a local government responsibility. The main exception proving the rule is the capital, Budapest. The local population here are aware that without state involvement organising and operating public transport in the capital is not possible. The 0.44 value for Budapest indicates that state involvement exceeding local government involvement is deemed necessary by the local population.

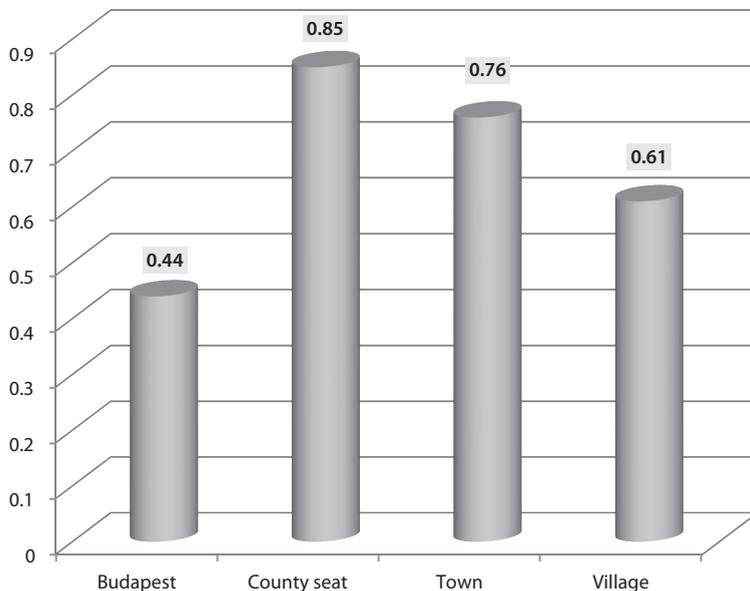


Figure 3. The responsibility of public transport. Comparative data  
 Source: Compiled by the author.

The differences based on territorial distribution of all the responsibilities required of those providing an answer is shown in the table below:

Table 19. Differences based on territorial distribution of all the responsibilities

	Budapest	County seat	Town	Village	All	Min. or max. difference
Providing public safety	<b>0.60</b>	0.74	0.73	0.70	0.70	0.14
<b>Organising public transport</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>0.85</b>	0.76	0.61	0.68	<b>0.41</b>
Environmental care and providing public hygiene	<b>0.68</b>	0.83	0.83	<b>0.85</b>	0.81	0.17
Construction and maintenance of the road network	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.74</b>	0.68	0.69	0.67	0.20
Construction and maintenance of the sewerage system	<b>0.57</b>	<b>0.78</b>	0.75	0.72	0.71	0.21
Providing public lighting	<b>0.56</b>	<b>0.82</b>	0.78	0.77	0.74	0.26
Providing healthcare	<b>0.53</b>	0.64	0.67	<b>0.75</b>	0.66	0.11
Providing crèche and pre-school care	<b>0.64</b>	0.74	0.78	<b>0.81</b>	0.76	0.17
Operating primary and secondary schools and providing education	<b>0.56</b>	0.67	0.73	0.73	0.69	0.17
Creating new employment	<b>0.50</b>	0.64	0.64	0.67	0.63	0.17
Organising refuse removal and waste management	<b>0.60</b>	0.79	0.78	0.79	0.75	0.19
<b>Providing public utility services (electricity, drinking water and natural gas) for households</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.72</b>	0.59	0.59	0.59	<b>0.29</b>
Local public employment	<b>0.70</b>	0.84	0.84	<b>0.90</b>	0.83	0.20
Welfare cash benefits	<b>0.69</b>	0.77	0.79	<b>0.83</b>	0.78	0.14

Source: Compiled by the author.

In summary, the representative research nationwide and in the Csongrád county seat both serve as an indication that the majority of the population envisages an extended self-government system with functional responsibilities.

The hypothesis formulated by the research group seemed to have been verified, since the generated tables based on the research findings clearly show that the

amendments to Act No. CLXXXIX of 2011 are reflected more in the responses given by the local population if the relationship of a large proportion of the population with the local government is considered direct in terms of accessing certain services mostly in smaller municipalities.

When carrying out summary evaluations of the restructuring of the self-government system, these findings, supplemented with those of the qualitative research, should be kept in mind during the ongoing empirical research.

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