

Adapting to Reality: Policy Feedback and the Evolution of Citizen Attitudes towards Local Government in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The literature on centralisation and decentralisation pays little attention to how the structure itself influences voters' and, ultimately, consumers' access to public services and, through this, their attitudes. Do those who consider local governments to be essential providers of public services regard local autonomy as more important than those who expect the state to ensure the quality of services? Hungary is an excellent case for the empirical examination of this question, as the fundamentally decentralised structure established in 1990 has shifted increasingly towards centralisation in recent years. This allows us to assess how the ongoing centralisation process, implemented in several waves since 2010, shapes citizens' attitudes and expectations towards local governments and public services.

Methodology: To examine this, we use a database collected through two large-scale questionnaire surveys conducted five years apart. The data from the two population surveys (first wave in 2018, second wave in 2023) are comparable, as the same questions were repeated in both surveys. While the 2018 data collection was based on personal interviews with 1,500 respondents, the 2023 data collection was based on an online sample of 1,800 respondents, with both data collections representative in terms of municipality size, educational level, gender, and age group. The survey therefore examines the attitudes and changing expectations of the population towards local governments and public services in a system that has become increasingly centralised since 2010. I seek answers to the central question of how the government's reduction of local government autonomy affects voters' trust in local governments and public services.

Findings: The survey results highlighted several disadvantages of the centralisation of public services, mainly resulting from the neglect of local needs. The results show that people prefer accessibility and proximity to service providers, especially when they do not perceive significant

improvements in quality or accessibility. The distribution of opinions suggests that it is no exaggeration to say that local governments, by their very existence, represent a source of value for people in a certain sense. At the same time, the responses clearly show the effects of strong government centralisation, as people, especially in small towns and villages, expect certain services to be provided by the state and do not see a problem with the fact that some functions were previously the responsibility of local governments.

Academic contribution to the field: The study uses empirical data processing and quantitative evaluation, thereby creating opportunities for further methodological development in research on this topic. Its methods and results differ from the mainstream of traditional research on centralisation and decentralisation, which is generally based on qualitative evaluation. The study primarily applies policy feedback theory to examine the long-term effects of centralisation on citizens' attitudes. It reveals a "pragmatic duality" in public opinion, whereby citizens' expectations shift towards the central state despite their normative support for local autonomy.

Research implications/limitation: The results clearly show that respondents partly follow the government's centralisation intentions; that is, the choice between local self-government and centralisation is less important to them. Although they consider the existence of local government important, they do not primarily associate it with the number or quality of public services, but rather with decision-making autonomy, so that certain decisions can be made at the local government level.

Originality/value: The study is also original in that it presents and analyses changes in access to services and in relations between central government and local authorities. Using empirical and comparable databases, it shows the extent and impact of change on local consumers, thereby enriching the debate on centralisation and decentralisation and exploring possible directions for the future.

Keywords: local government, centralisation, decentralisation, autonomy, public services, Hungary

Prilagajanje realnosti: povratni učinki politik in razvoj stališč državljanov do lokalne samouprave na Madžarskem

POVZETEK

Namen: literatura o centralizaciji in decentralizaciji namenja razmeroma malo pozornosti vprašanju, kako institucionalna struktura vpliva na dostop volivcev in navsezadnje uporabnikov do javnih storitev ter prek tega na njihova stališča. Ali tisti, ki lokalne oblasti razumejo kot ključne izvajalce javnih storitev, lokalni avtonomiji pripisujejo večji pomen kakor tisti, ki od države pričakujejo zagotavljanje kakovosti storitev? Madžarska je izvrsten primer za empirično proučitev tega vprašanja, saj se je prvotno decentralizirana ureditev, vzpostavljena leta 1990, v zadnjih letih postopno premaknila v smer centralizacije. To omogoča oceno, kako tekoči proces centralizacije, ki se od leta 2010 izvaja v več valovih, oblikuje stališča in pričakovanja državljanov do lokalnih oblasti in javnih storitev.

Metodologija: avtor pri analizi uporablja podatkovno bazo, oblikovano na podlagi dveh obsežnih anketnih raziskav, izvedenih v razmiku petih let. Podatki iz obeh populacijskih anket (prvi val leta 2018, drugi leta 2023) so primerljivi, ker so bila v obeh raziskavah uporabljena ista vprašanja. Zbiranje podatkov leta 2018 je temeljilo na osebnem anketiranju 1.500 respondentov, zbiranje podatkov leta 2023 pa je temeljilo na spletnem vzorcu 1.800 respondentov; obe zbiranji podatkov sta bili reprezentativni glede na velikost občine, stopnjo izobrazbe, spol in starostne skupine. Raziskava tako preučuje stališča prebivalstva in spreminjajoča se pričakovanja glede lokalnih oblasti in javnih storitev v sistemu, ki je od leta 2010 vse bolj centraliziran. Osrednje raziskovalno vprašanje je, kako vladno zmanjševanje avtonomije lokalne samouprave vpliva na zaupanje volivcev v lokalne oblasti in javne storitve.

Ugotovitve: rezultati raziskave so izpostavili več pomanjkljivosti centralizacije javnih storitev, ki izvirajo predvsem iz zanemarjanja lokalnih potreb. Ugotovitve kažejo, da ljudje dajejo prednost dostopnosti storitev in geografski bližini izvajalcev, zlasti kadar ne zaznavajo bistvenega izboljšanja kakovosti ali dostopnosti. Razporeditev mnenj kaže, da ni pretirano trditi, da so lokalne oblasti že s svojim obstojem v nekem smislu vrednota za ljudi. Hkrati odgovori jasno razkrivajo učinke močne državne centralizacije, saj ljudje, zlasti v manjših mestih in vaseh, pričakujejo, da bo nekatere storitve zagotavljala država, in ne vidijo težave v tem, da so bile nekatere funkcije prej v pristojnosti lokalnih oblasti.

Akademski prispevek k področju: študija temelji na empirični obdelavi podatkov in kvantitativnem vrednotenju, s čimer odpira možnosti za nadaljnji metodološki razvoj raziskovanja na tem področju. Njene metode in rezultati odstopajo od prevladujočega toka tradicionalnih raziskav centralizacije in decentralizacije, ki praviloma temeljijo na kvalitativnem vrednotenju. Študija predvsem uporablja teorijo povratnih učinkov politik za preučitev dolgoročnih učinkov centralizacije na stališča državljanov. Pri tem razkriva »pragmatično dualnost« v javnem mnenju, v okviru katere se pričakovanja državljanov pomikajo proti centralni državi, čeprav ti normativno podpirajo lokalno avtonomijo.

Raziskovalne implikacije/omejitve: rezultati jasno kažejo, da anketiranci deloma sledijo vladnim težnjam po centralizaciji; izbira med lokalno samoupravo in centralizacijo jim je torej manj pomembna. Čeprav menijo, da je obstoj lokalne samouprave pomemben, ga ne povezujejo predvsem s številom ali kakovostjo javnih storitev, temveč bolj z avtonomijo odločanja, torej z možnostjo, da se nekatere odločitve sprejemajo na ravni lokalne samouprave.

Izvirnost/vrednost: študija je izvirna tudi zato, ker prikazuje in analizira spremembe v dostopu do storitev ter v razmerjih med centralno oblastjo in lokalnimi oblastmi. Na podlagi empiričnih in medsebojno primerljivih podatkovnih baz pokaže obseg sprememb ter njihov vpliv na lokalne uporabnike, s čimer bogati razpravo o centralizaciji in decentralizaciji ter odpira možne smeri prihodnjega razvoja.

Ključne besede: lokalna samouprava, centralizacija, decentralizacija, avtonomija, javne storitve, Madžarska

JEL:

1 Introduction

Centralisation, i.e. the concentration of decision-making powers within central government, has a profound impact on the area of public services. While it brings benefits such as uniformity and efficiency, it also poses challenges regarding flexibility and local ownership. One of the key benefits of centralisation is the promotion of uniformity. Central governments can reduce regional disparities by standardising services such as health and education. At the same time, centralisation also affects economies of scale by reducing costs through bulk purchases of resources, such as medical equipment or school supplies. Additionally, a central authority can rapidly coordinate responses in crises, such as pandemics, thereby bypassing fragmented local efforts. But centralisation risks creating a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach. Local authorities tailored to community-specific needs may lose autonomy in addressing specific challenges. Urban areas may require different infrastructure investments than rural regions, but central policies often ignore these needs. The distance between policymakers and citizens can undermine trust, as communities feel disconnected from decisions that affect them.

Centralized systems are efficient, but they can also hinder adaptability and often ignore local needs. Although funds can be fairly distributed in theory, political priorities can divert resources from marginalised areas. Conversely, local government could better target needs but may not have the necessary budgetary capacity. The relationship between these two different perspectives and their impact on local voters as consumers is a less-researched topic. Therefore, examining this and the complex interrelationships between them can lead to interesting conclusions.

2 Theoretical Background

Based on the above introduction, the centralisation of public services is essentially a paradox: it increases consistency and coordination, but at the same time carries the risk of reducing efficiency and depriving citizens of their rights. The optimal balance can be found in so-called 'hybrid' models, where central frameworks ensure fairness while allowing flexibility for local actors (Kákai, 2021). By combining national standards with regional adaptability, governments can mitigate the pitfalls of centralisation while capitalising on their strengths. The optimal ratio of centralisation and decentralisation can be influenced by extremely complex factors, which can complement each other in terms of time and space, making it extremely difficult to establish general rules (Charbit, 2011). The exercise of socially shared functions therefore involves not only centralised activities, but also requires a territorial approach, not simply from an organisational point of view, but for reasons based on the specific nature of public goods and services (Bailey, 1999, pp. 6-8). It is well known, however, that a transfer of necessary resources must accompany any decentralisation of tasks and responsibilities, as the lack of financial autonomy calls into question decision-making autonomy. With the European Community and the Council of Europe making local autonomy and

decentralisation a normative political value in European countries, many international organisations around the world have not only set decentralisation as a goal but have also taken an active role in providing political and technical support for decentralisation reforms (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007). This means that own revenues and central budget transfers predominate in developed countries with multi-level financial governance systems and can be arranged in different patterns according to their proportions. The authors of the so-called „decentralisation index” have already distinguished between administrative, political, decision-making, qualitative and quantitative financial and executive decentralisation and found that economically well-performing countries tend to show higher levels of decentralisation. The change in perception was triggered by a series of mainly financial crises culminating in the 2008 global financial crisis. This was because the smaller and less affluent states that emerged were unable to address their problems effectively. In this case, the small and cheap state was juxtaposed with a weak state. As regards ‘hybrid’ state systems such as government, the main criticism has been the lack of transparency and democratic legitimacy (Peters and Pierre, 2006). Consequently, the so-called ‘neo-Web state’ concept has emphasised strengthening state functions compared to the past, the requirement for professional delivery of quality services, the extension of consultations between citizens and public administration and the spread of a results-based approach. Although the model cannot be considered a new paradigm of governance, it has brought significant shifts in many countries, eclipsing the prestige and scope of New Public Management (Dreschler and Kattel, 2009). Therefore, the new approaches have not been crystallised around the specificities of centralisation/decentralisation but rather around the deterioration or improvement of local service delivery and corresponding customer satisfaction. The conceptual framework of the centralisation/decentralisation dichotomy has remained relatively stable over the past few decades, leading to a rich array of similar viewpoints, arguments, and counterarguments in various comparisons (Begg et al., 1993; Linder, 2002). There is a growing consensus on the crucial role of context. Based on the advantages and disadvantages listed in the literature, the nature and extent of decentralisation appear to be a matter of professional and political judgment appropriate to times and areas. Decentralisation is context-dependent; its benefits are not automatic, and decentralisation and centralisation can refer to a whole range of administrative or political processes, de jure or de facto (Hutchcroft, 2001). The processes that triggered this effect are complex, as the economic crisis that followed 2009, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent financial and political developments in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war have led to new waves of centralisation in developed countries (Andreotti and Mingione, 2016). And in many cases, the political and economic reactions (especially the emergence of hybrid regimes after 2010, referring to populist tendencies (Thomas and Tufts, 2015) have also ultimately affected the centralisation of public service systems, in part by increasing political control and influence (Agartan and Kuhlmann, 2019). When clarifying the theoretical framework of this study, we cannot ignore the Policy Feedback Theory, which has been widely applied

in both political science and economics in recent times, and which focuses on examining the impact of specific policies on public opinion and the responses to them. More precisely, it deals with the complex question —as does this study— that citizens' attitudes are shaped primarily not by specific knowledge of legislation, but by the new institutional reality created by changed policies and their everyday experience (Mettler and Sorelle, 2018; Ericsson, 2021). Public administration research increasingly recognises the importance of "Lived Experience" in the evaluation of various policies, i.e., the opinions of citizens, even if they do not have precise legal knowledge or knowledge of the law itself, are a valuable and useful source because they reflect lived reality (Mintrom et al., 2024). These approaches are well-suited to examining the cumulative effects of the centralisation trends in Hungary since 2010.

3 Methodological and Analytical Framework

A less important topic in international academic debates on local government is the impact of changes in governance models on the functioning of local/ county governments at the bottom of the state structure and on the access of the population to public services. How can the local level respond to the changing challenges of globalisation and what short- and long-term responses can it provide to complex social, economic, cultural and development problems? The question is, therefore, whether centralisation or decentralisation is more suitable for dealing with this multifaceted set of problems.

The methodology used to examine the above questions is based on two pillars. First, examine and organise existing legal and financial information (desk research), i.e. process, systematise and analyse existing data and information. The other is a public opinion poll (commissioned by the National University of Public Service – KÖFOP-2.12.-VEKOP-15-2016-00001), which was based on a representative sample of 1,500 people (including socio-demographic and settlement type criteria) (Kákai, 2019). Five years later (in December 2023), we repeated the questionnaire survey (online) with a sample size of 1,875 people (Hungarian residents aged 18 and over). The sample represented the Hungarian population aged 18 and over, categorised by age groups, educational attainment, gender, settlement type, and region. Respondents were selected at random for the sample. The primary objective of the comparative study is not to examine the legislative impact of the Local Government Act adopted in 2011, but to present the consequences of nearly a decade of centralisation. Given that I did not have data of similar depth for the period before 2011, a longitudinal analysis of the data from the five years between 2018 and 2023 is not a flawed undertaking, as this period coincides with a further deepening of centralization (e.g., extraordinary governance during COVID-19, the introduction of "priority economic zones," the withdrawal of vehicle tax, etc.).

Although the two data surveys are far removed in time from the 2011 legislation, the research is not an event study measuring the law's immediate impact. The aim is to explore the long-term attitude-shaping effects, which

require time for the policy feedback mechanisms to take effect and for the “experiences” to settle (Mintrom et al., 2024).

Thus, the shift between the two measurements captures not only a static state, but also an ongoing dynamic. Therefore, the primary goal of the study is not to compare the situation with that before 2011, but to document the change in public attitudes in a system that is already highly centralised but is becoming even more so.

From a methodological point of view, it is important to mention that the widespread use of online technology and the Internet has also transformed the field of public opinion research. Today, almost every household has some form of Internet access, which means that Internet services are available to all age groups, who are also able to actively use them. At the same time, the prevalence of landline telephones (which form the backbone of telephone data collection, as 80% of surveys are conducted via this channel to minimise costs) has declined rapidly, with the under-50 age group having virtually no access to such services. In the case of personal interview surveys, a significant obstacle is that, according to industry experience, the willingness to respond is steadily declining, meaning that interviewers are finding it increasingly difficult to reach potential respondents. These factors make it increasingly difficult to collect questionnaires using these methods, which greatly reduces the chances of achieving a perfect random sample.

The central methodological principle of this study, which I also presented in the theoretical framework, is that public opinion on governance structures is shaped not primarily by explicit knowledge of the text of legislation, but by the totality of experiences gained in the institutional environment created by it. (Mintrom et al., 2024).⁷ In this respect, our approach is consistent with the basic principles of political feedback theory, according to which policies transform subsequent political processes by shaping citizens’ experiences and perceptions. (Ericsson, 2021).² Therefore, the temporal distance between the 2011 law and our surveys (2018, 2023) is not a limitation, but a necessary condition for capturing the mature, long-term effects of a centralizing policy shift that influences public opinion, rather than examining immediate, temporary reactions. The research examines the consequences of a sustained political direction in which citizens’ attitudes are shaped by their daily interactions with the transformed public service system, a phenomenon that is well documented in the administrative literature (Mintrom et al., 2024).⁶

4 Relations between financial and municipal (public) tasks in Hungary

Considering these trends and shifts in emphasis, the changes to the Hungarian system of local government after 2010 should be examined. The Local Government Act (CLXXXIX. (Mötv.), adopted in 2011, has significantly reshaped local public service structures and local government functions. In contrast to the decentralisation experiment based on consensus in 1990, the

coalition that came to power in 2021 introduced strong centralisation in the spirit of a so-called neo-Weberian philosophy. The essence of this, in contrast to the New Public Management (NPM) approach that dominated the 1990s, is that while NPM sought to orient the state towards market principles, the neo-Weberian model focused on rethinking the role of the state and expanding its powers. Within the framework of neo-Weberian thinking, greater emphasis was placed on the requirement for high-quality services and their professional delivery, consultation with citizens and public administration, and a results-oriented approach, compared to the previous government's term. The process in Hungary began with the enactment of a completely new constitution, followed by a new local government law, a complete reorganisation of the state and local government system, and finally, in parallel with this, the introduction of a new financing system. The US mortgage crisis that erupted in 2009 played a significant role in forcing change, resulting in a weakening of the forint exchange rate, which was further exacerbated by economic policy decisions after 2010. all of which (due to large open foreign exchange positions) led to a significant increase in the loan portfolio. Consequently, the government had to act. It put together a debt consolidation package to manage the debt. In June 2013, the state took on approximately HUF 610 billion in debt from municipalities with a population of more than 277,500. In the two categories of municipalities (i.e. those with a population of less than 5,000 and those with a population of 5,000 or more), the state took over a total of HUF 694.2 billion in debt from the total debt stock of HUF 1.182 billion at the end of 2012 (Vasvári, 2020). This has led to a significant improvement in the budgetary situation of local governments after 2011.

After 2010, one change in local government public funding was the introduction of so-called earmarked funding in 2013. In practice, this meant that local governments received central budgetary support in proportion to the difference between planned average expenditure and expected revenue. As a result of the change, local governments received a share from the central budget corresponding to the difference between planned average expenditures and expected revenues. (Horváth et al., 2014, p. 339). The transition to the new financing system was not smooth, as it involved a shift from the previous normative financing system, which was based primarily on unrestricted spending, to a cost-oriented system based on spending limits.

Since 2013, the state has provided general support for administrative services necessary for local governments to perform their mandatory tasks, communal services (including public lighting, maintenance of public cemeteries, maintenance of public roads and management of green areas), special social services (institutional care) and public education (Tállai, 2014). Thanks to legislative changes, larger municipalities have more powers. The model calculations of Mezei and his colleagues (2014) confirmed the correlation between 'larger settlements – more tasks', which shows a greater leap in the case of settlement groups with 2,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, in line with the rules for the distribution of mandatory municipal tasks. As Somlyódiné's data (2019) collection has shown, the scope of mandatory tasks of local governments has

been significantly reduced after 2014, in connection with the restructuring of the state's large-scale care systems and the reallocation of specific tasks. Thus, the fundamental restructuring of the decentralised public service system between 2010 and 2012 reduced the number of functions performed at the local level by 29%, resulting in local government expenditure accounting for only 9% of GDP in 2012 (Horváth et al., 2014, p. 125).

The structural change is reflected in the new legislation's cornerstone provisions, which do not mention the maintenance tasks of education, health care and other institutions providing territorial care. Since 2013, the entire organisational system of primary and secondary education in local government, which previously constituted the largest expenditure item for local governments, has essentially been centralised. Specialised healthcare institutions, i.e., hospitals and integrated outpatient specialised care institutions, have also been removed. The takeover of schools and hospitals has also significantly reduced the financial share of the tasks performed at the local level.

The transformation did not spare county governments either, as they were stripped of all their public service functions (cultural centres, libraries, museums, archives, etc.) and given minimal regional development functions in return. The government has embarked on a major overhaul of national property rules, both in general and specific sectors (water management, waste management, energy services, etc.). Overall, the state has assumed a decisive role in energy supply, water supply and services, waste management, maintaining public order in cities, road maintenance and local public transport.

The National Waste Management Coordination and Asset Management Ltd. (NHKV) was established by Act CLXXXV of 2012 on waste and started its operations in January 2016. The aim of NHKV Ltd. was to establish a nationally unified waste management system. The NHKV Zrt. collects waste management fees and finances public service providers. Municipalities and service providers continued to collect and treat waste, but the collection of fees and financial management were transferred to NHKV Zrt. Then, from 1 July 2024, a new concession system for public waste management services came into force. MOHU MOL Waste Management Ltd. took over the collection and treatment of municipal waste as a concession company. Municipalities retained their public waste management tasks, but MOHU or its subcontractors carried out waste collection and treatment. The transfer of waste management tasks to the state and the introduction of the concession system reduced the autonomy of municipalities in this area. Although the municipalities retained responsibility for public sanitation, waste collection and treatment management were transferred to the state organisations and the concession company. This change has resulted in a significant reduction in the regulatory powers of local authorities in the waste management sector. The increase in the state's role in waste management and the introduction of the concession system have had a significant impact on the responsibilities and autonomy of municipalities.

The June 2021 amendment to Act CCIX of 2011 on water utility services allowed municipalities to voluntarily transfer their water utility service responsibilities and assets to the state. As a result of the integration, 14 previously municipally owned water utilities joined the state-owned utilities in 2023.

Construction regulations have also been reformed, creating new challenges and tasks for municipalities. As a result, after 2010, the centralisation of building regulations and the simplification of permit-granting processes have significantly reduced the powers of municipalities, particularly in building authority functions. At the same time, they can still shape local building processes to a certain extent through the regulations on protecting the urban landscape. The changes have significantly altered the role and scope of local authorities in building regulation. The above examples also show that public property has gradually expanded to include local government functions.

Also, in such a way that the business profit remaining in the municipal sector was reduced by centrally setting consumer charges (So-called 'residential rent cuts'). Due to the reorganisation of powers, the range of tasks to be performed by local authorities has been significantly reduced. The legislation that came into force during the COVID-19 pandemic (Government Decree 135/2020 (IV. 17.) also illustrates the government's centralisation logic well. (IV. 17.) Government Decree), which stipulates that although county governments were granted new powers in the areas of development and planning (without allocated resources), municipalities remained responsible for the provision of municipal public services, despite being deprived of one of their main sources of income (Balázs and Hoffman, 2020, p. 14).

According to data collected and analysed by Somlyódiné (2019), the scope of mandatory tasks of Hungarian local governments has significantly decreased since 2010 in connection with the reorganisation of large public service providers and infrastructure. Since 2010, as part of a fundamental overhaul of the decentralised system, the number of tasks performed at the local level has decreased by 29%. The COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war further strengthened the government's intention to centralise power. In an emergency, Parliament has granted the government the power to suspend certain laws, deviate from specific legal provisions, or take other extraordinary measures (as defined in the Constitution). It all started in 2016, with the "mass immigration crisis" that has been in place ever since. This was followed by the emergency caused by the coronavirus epidemic between March 2020 and June 2022, which greatly expanded the scope for decree-based governance.

The intention to centralise is more clearly expressed in official decisions that restricted the scope of activities and participation of local authorities in the management of epidemics. These include Government Decree No. 140/2020 (21.4.20) or No. 92/2020 (6.4.20), which exempted the taxpayers concerned from paying tourist tax and "transferred" all revenue from motor vehicle tax to the central budget, while the collection of the tax remained a delegated administrative task of municipal notaries (Hulkó and Pardavi, 2022). In both

cases, the revenue taken from the municipalities was accounted for by the government as a contribution to the central functions of epidemic control. A more significant measure is the Government Decree 135/2020 (17.4.20), which exempted the taxpayers concerned from paying the tourism tax.), which created a specific new legal institution by declaring those who carry out economic development and job-creating investments with an investment value of at least HUF 100 billion (Approximately 300 million Euro) as priority economic zones. This decision was also applied to the municipalities of Göd and Mosonmagyaróvár (both led by opposition coalitions). Later, the Constitutional Court (in its decision 8/2021 (III. 2.) AB) amended the decree to require the government to compensate local governments for their future loss of revenue. The problem for the municipalities was that the business tax from the investment was no longer a municipal revenue but was paid to the county government. However, this is not, in fact, a case of pure centralisation since the powers and property have been transferred not to the state administration or a central office but to the regional municipalities.

Finally, on 24 February 2022, a state of war and related energy emergency came into force.

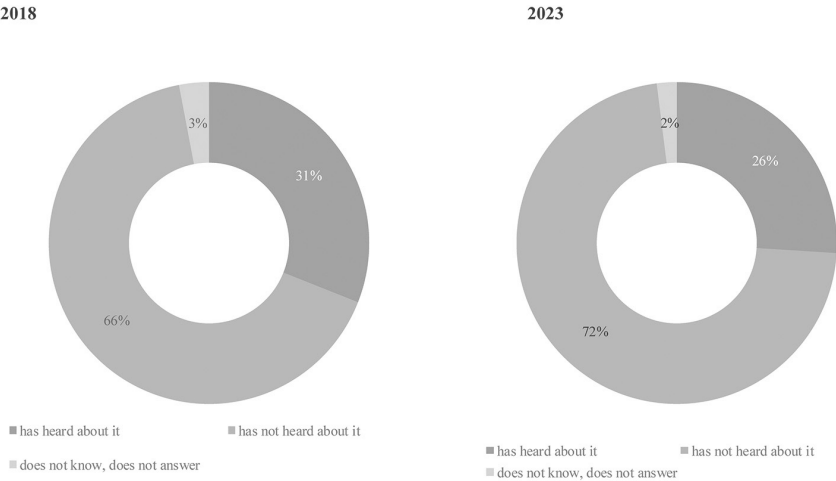
Emergency government has thus become part of the normal functioning of parliament, as Hungary has been under an emergency government for more than 2,500 days. Therefore, in total, 257 emergency government decrees were adopted in 2020 (35.1% of all new government decrees), 286 in 2021 (34.4% of all new government decrees), 267 in 2022 (41.9% of all new government decrees) and 203 in 2023 (29.5% of all new government decrees). This allows the government to deviate from the law and take extraordinary measures, bypassing parliament and making decisions that affect society without social oversight.

5 Public opinion on the changes based on research data

The new municipal law adopted in 2011 fundamentally transformed the structure of local public services and the tasks of municipalities. The question is how unilateral changes in the relationship between the state and its citizens in terms of public services affect the preferences of “consumers.” The questionnaire-based survey therefore seeks to answer whether, in a service structure that is becoming increasingly centralized from the fundamentally decentralized system established in 1990, consumer preferences follow government intentions, i.e., do they accept the curtailment of their local governments’ autonomy and accept the government’s “narrative” that the state can perform its service tasks better and more efficiently than local governments, profit-oriented enterprises or non-profit organizations? How important is it to the population that service decisions are made by the local governments they have elected, or is the quality and accessibility of services more important than who provides them? The Local Government Act, adopted in 2011, significantly restructured local public service structures and the tasks of local governments. The question is how the population is respond-

ing to these changes. What characterises their opinion of the local government system? Do they feel any difference in their everyday lives between local public services, their quality and the identity of the service provider? This question is also interesting because, according to value assessments conducted since the change of regime, the Hungarian population tends to underestimate the real costs of state intervention (i.e., tax expenditures). Most of the population, therefore, expects or demands state intervention and redistribution, even in areas where Csontos et al. (1996) argue it would generally be more efficient, cheaper, and perhaps fairer to involve private or business resources (Tóth, 2010).

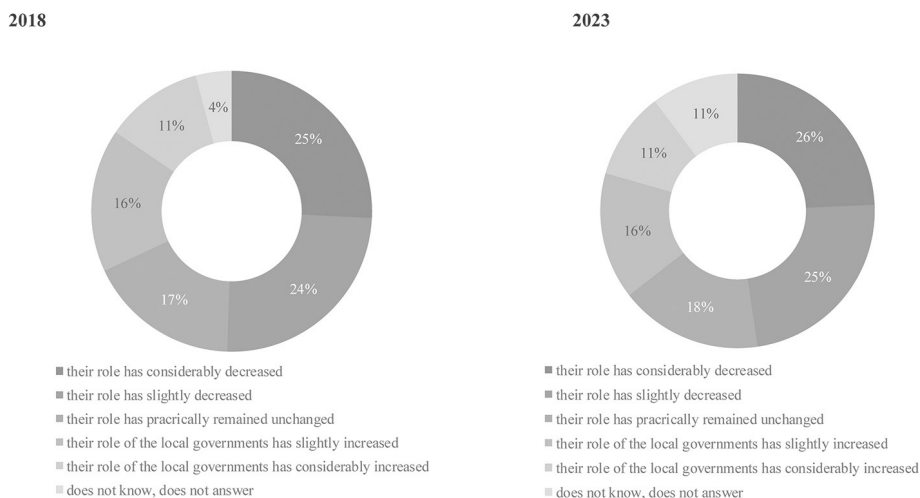
Figure 1: Did you hear that a new law on Local Government was passed in 2011?



Source: KÖFÖP survey, 2018 and comparison of data from Source Social Research Institute, 2023

Across the two datasets, the proportion of individuals who do not remember the adoption of the Local Government Act 2011 has increased, while the proportion of those who have heard about the adoption of the Act 2011 has decreased by almost 5% (see Figure 1). The number of people informed about the issue increases with the level of education. By settlement type, people living in villages are the least informed, i.e. they have heard the least about the amendment, compared to those living in larger settlements. However, this lack of information does not mean that people do not have opinions about the changing role of local government, which they have formed based on their everyday experiences and the situations they encounter (Mintrom et al., 2024). Most people who heard about the changes remember that the amendment reduced the role of local governments in local public services. Most people (51 per cent) who have heard about the changes are sure that they have reduced the powers of local government over local services.

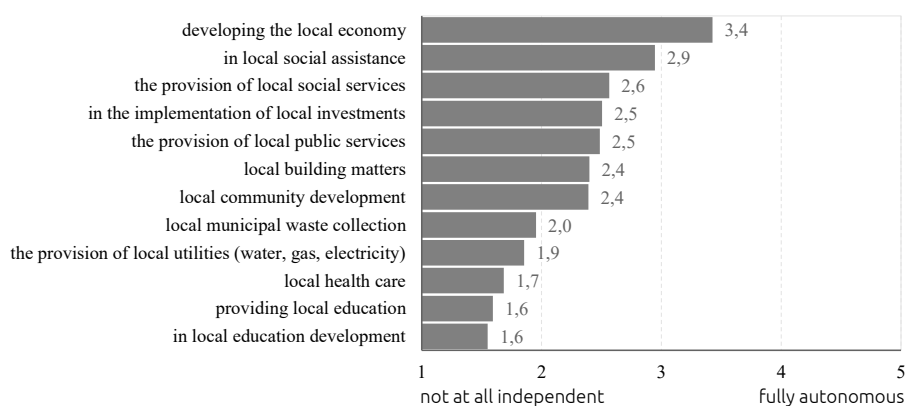
Figure 2: In your opinion, how has the role played by the local government changed because of the new law?



Source: KÖFÖP survey, 2018 and comparison of data from Social Research Institute, 2023

Regarding the independence of each public service, only local economic development exceeds the average scale (see Figure 3). All other areas clearly show that respondents perceive them as less independent of the state.

Figure 3: To what extent can local authorities be considered autonomous in the following areas? (average of the responses of those who gave a meaningful answer on a five-point scale)



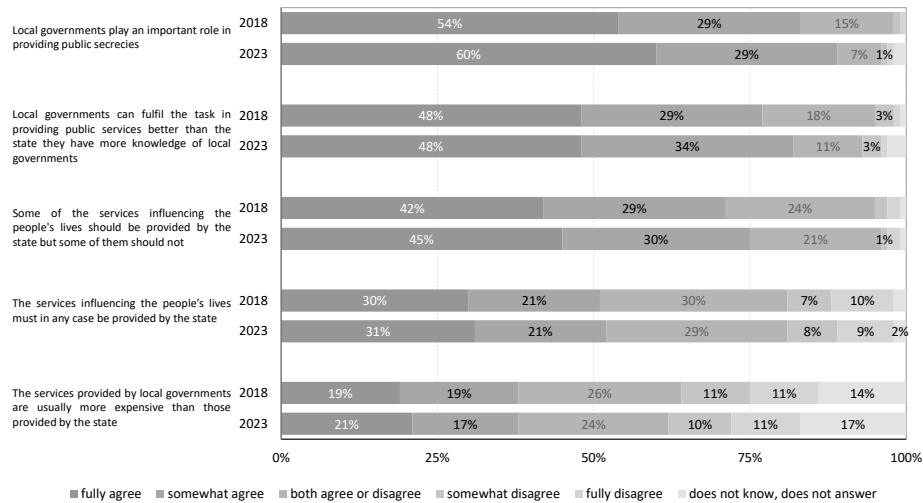
Source: Social Research Institute, 2023

The areas with the most perceived dependency on government were local municipal waste, water, gas, electricity, and local health, education, and educational development.

The above is also supported by the strong views expressed on the role of local government in public services and whether the state or local government can

better deliver these services, with most respondents opting for local government (see Figure 4). Most respondents believe that local government plays a crucial role in delivering public services and is better equipped to do so due to its in-depth knowledge of local needs.

Figure 4: Local government or state dichotomy¹

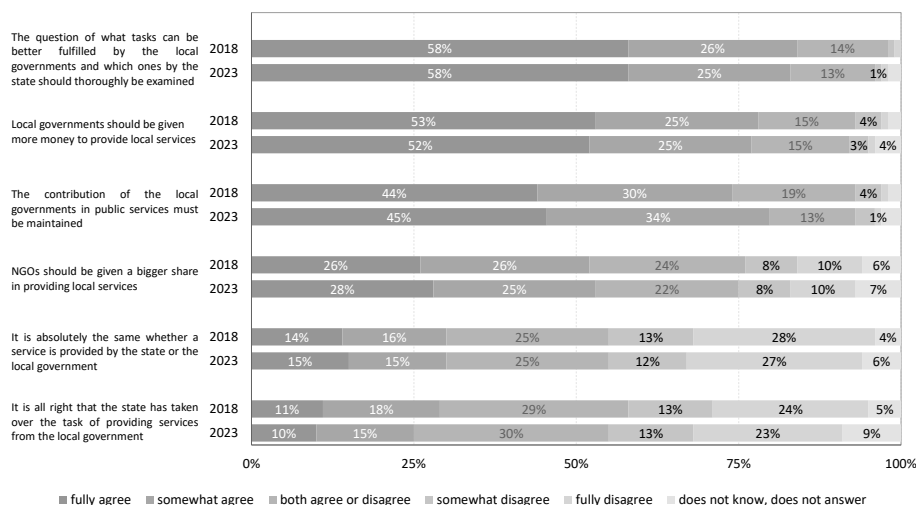


Source: KÖFÖP survey, 2018 and comparison of data from Source Social Research Institute, 2023

Nevertheless, the respondents acknowledge that the state must perform some tasks and that responsibilities must be carefully distributed between the two agents. They also have definite negative opinions about the overextension of the state and the centralisation of municipal tasks (see Figure 5).

¹ The question used in both surveys was as follows: Many people believe that services affecting people's lives should be provided by the state, while others do not consider it necessary for the state to provide such services. Please indicate your opinion on this matter. Give your answer as you would at school, where 5 means you completely agree and 1 means you completely disagree" (Kákai, 2021, p. 718).

Figure 5: Local government or state dichotomy²



Source: KÖFÖP survey, 2018 and comparison of data from Source Social Research Institute, 2023

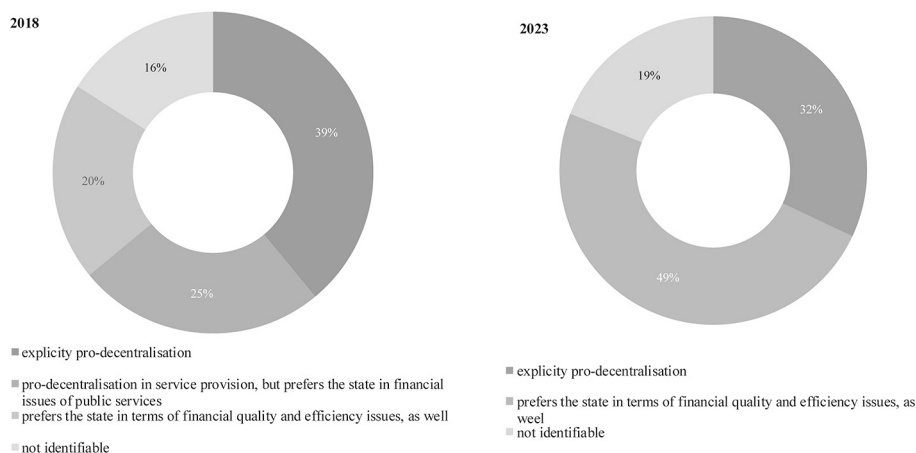
The two figures clearly show that the population strongly supports the role of local governments and decentralisation at the normative level. Next, let's convert the opinions expressed in the above questions into Likert-scale statements, then summarise them.

Factor analysis reveals two distinct dimensions of opinion behind the eleven attitude questions. First, these statements examine whether the state or the municipality should provide local services from a qualitative and efficient perspective. The second objective of the analysis was to investigate the division of tasks from a financial and cost-effectiveness perspective. Using the two factors thus identified, cluster analysis revealed the patterns that emerge in Hungarian society along the opinion dimensions we employed, and we were able to determine the size and characteristics of the groups in which these patterns predominate.

This accounts for 39% of respondents, who are clearly in favour of decentralisation in terms of quality and efficiency (see Figure 6) and prefer local governments to the state (Kákai, 2020, p. 81).

² The question used in both surveys was as follows: „I am going to read you some statements about the changing role of local authorities in public services. Please tell us your opinion about each of these. Indicate your answers as you would in school, with a 1 meaning you fully disagree and a 5 meaning you fully agree” (Kákai, 2021, p. 719).

Figure 6: Local government or state dichotomy – Groups created using factor and cluster analysis in 2018 and 2023³



Source: KÖFÖP survey, 2018 and comparison of data from Source Social Research Institute, 2023

A comparison of the two graphs shows that the group that supports decentralization in the provision of services but sides with the state on the financial aspects of public services will have disappeared by 2023, while the proportion of the economic, quality, and efficiency groups will have grown to almost 50%, clearly showing that respondents expect the state to provide solutions in terms of both financing and quality in the area of services. The proportion supporting decentralisation has fallen by almost seven percentage points since 2018. Thus, those who support local governments in terms of the quality and efficiency of public services account for 32% of respondents. The data clearly show a decline in respondents' autonomy among local governments.

This statement is supported by the fact that the large number of variables observed in 2018 has broken down into smaller pieces. Those who partially support decentralisation (25%) have disappeared, and the number of respondents who support centralisation has increased significantly (49%).

The data clearly show a decrease in the proportion of respondents who are in favour of decentralisation, but also a reduction in the proportion who are in favour of centralisation, and an apparent increase (almost half of respondents) in the proportion who do not formulate financial and quality expectations of local authorities but expect them from the state. At the same time, in my opinion, this apparent change does not reinforce the contradiction, but rather the rational and complex adaptation of citizens. In my opinion, there are two parallel layers to the explanation of these opinions:

- 1 A normative-value-based layer, in which respondents regard the autonomy of local governments as a fundamental democratic value. They consider

³ The questions shown in Figures 4 and 5 were based on a cluster analysis of the 12 statements in the questionnaire.

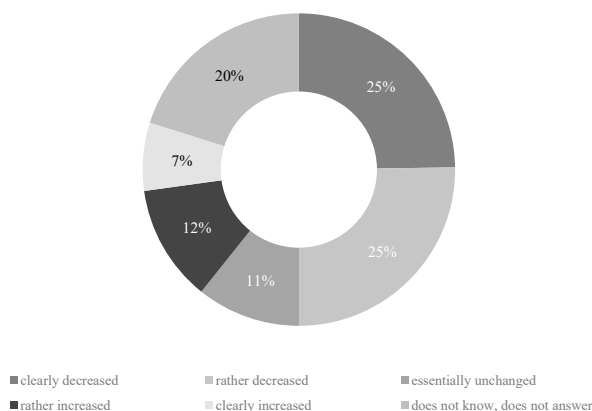
it essential to “have someone to turn to in the given municipality” so that decisions can be made at the local community level. This is a kind of “civic identity” and an expression of belonging to the local community, as illustrated by Figures 4 and 5, which show an existing preference.

2. The other is a pragmatic-experiential layer, since 2010, people have experienced that control over resources, developments, and complex services is in the hands of the central government. In essence, they have recognised that local governments have become dependent on the central government in terms of finances and the scope of their authority. Thus, the distribution of attitudes in Figure 6 essentially reflects this pragmatic application: if only the state can guarantee quality services, then it is rational to expect it to do so.

Therefore, the shift between the two data sets cannot be attributed to inconsistencies among citizens, but rather to the logical reflection of the centralised political system in voters’ experiences. In this duality, respondents simultaneously adhere to the ideal of local democracy while aligning their everyday expectations with the actual holders of power and resources.

To summarise the opinions, there has been a change in public opinion regarding the independence of local governments: 49.6% of the population believes that their autonomy has decreased over the past five years. In contrast, only one-fifth of respondents felt that the independence of local governments had increased over the past five years.

Figure 7: In your opinion, the autonomy of local authorities has increased over the last 5 years?

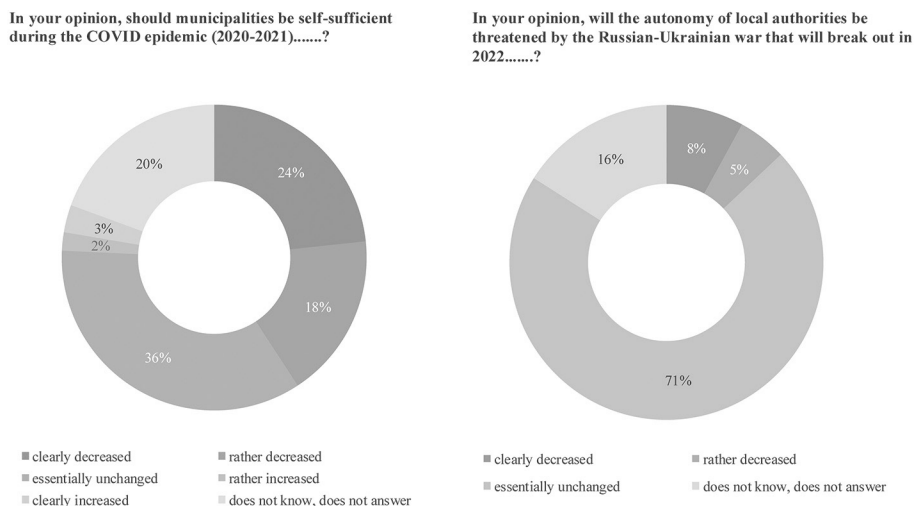


Source: Source Social Research Institute, 2023

To find out what caused this negative turn of events, we also ask questions about the COVID-19 epidemic and the emergency caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war (see Figure 8). Our aim with this question was to show that crisis situations almost everywhere point towards an increasing demand for

centralised decisions, as fast-changing situations require rapid reactions and quick decisions, which usually assess the role of central governments.

Figure 8: Perceptions of local government autonomy during times of crisis



Source: Source Social Research Institute, 2023

The survey data shows that nearly 52% of respondents believe that government action has reduced the role of local government in local services. These views align with those of half of the respondents who perceive that local government autonomy has declined over the past five years. We also examined the change in opinion from the perspective of whether the independence of local governments can be linked to events or developments that have had a significant impact in recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian-Ukrainian war. The distribution of responses indicates that while 42% of respondents believed the autonomy of municipalities had decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 13% attributed this to the emergency following the war. The data, therefore, clearly indicate that the decline in autonomy of local governments is not a function of either the epidemic or the war emergency, i.e., the decline in autonomy is more general, indicating that it is due to government action.

6 Discussion

The literature analysing European administrative reforms identifies which models become dominant in specific periods (Loughlin et al., 2011). The decentralisation processes taking place in post-communist countries do not necessarily follow the cycles characteristic of Western democracies, which are determined by various objective, historical, cultural, and subjective factors (Emilewicz and Wolek, 2002; Dunn et al., 2006). The recentralisation in Hungary presented in this study cannot be placed in the context of typically

transitional and crisis-management centralisation reforms, nor in the context of reforms implemented in the wake of the ideology-driven neo-Weberian model of public administration (Hajnal and Rosta, 2014), which were more characteristic of traditionally decentralised countries (Lago et al., 2020), but rather as a clear part and consequence of the “illiberal turn” after 2010.

Increased centralisation was a tried and tested method of managing the economic situation across Europe following the 2008 economic crisis. Significant austerity measures and power shifts took place in many countries. This is supported by the fact that in more than half of OECD countries, the decline in local revenues between 2008 and 2010 exceeded the decline in central government revenues for at least one year (this phenomenon can be observed in Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, but also in some large European countries (France, Spain, Poland). Only in a few countries did the local revenue structure strengthen, but even here, only through supplementary sources (Czech Republic, Slovenia) (Halmosi, 2013, pp. 297-298; Blöchliger and Vammalle, 2012). Hungary is no different from other European countries in this respect. Thus, answering the question of what solution a given country considers appropriate to overcome the negative trends of the crisis is not a simple task, as centralisation or decentralisation cannot be examined in a clear cause-and-effect relationship. Due to the differences between the two governmental structures (centralisation vs. decentralisation), the success of individual models may depend on several factors, ranging from the economic, social, political and cultural context of the country to its structural characteristics (Litvack et al., 1998). At the same time, it should be emphasised that the post-2010 restructuring of the Hungarian local government system presented in the study cannot be interpreted solely because of the constraints imposed by the economic crisis. Instead, we must assume that this was the result of firm political decisions taken by the government in line with international standards. This is supported by the fact that, through a law adopted under extraordinary procedure, Parliament placed almost all county, municipal, and local public service institutions under state control (including education, child protection, healthcare, and culture) (Temesi, 2017).

The data presented in the study therefore do not indicate what the optimal ratio of centralisation or decentralisation would be (Pálné, 2008), since the central state itself exercises a kind of control over the economy by intervening to a certain extent, meaning that it provides public services in certain areas or carries out some form of redistribution in social and economic subsystems (Kornai, 2017, p. 71). Thus, disagreements and conflicts naturally arise and develop between the actors participating in the system at the points of contact between these subsystems. Considering this, it is difficult to answer whether the centralised organisation of public services can be regarded as ineffective or less effective. Rather, the question is how a country that built a decentralised structure after the change of regime can transform its local government system into a more centralised structure without opposition from local governments, local government associations, or ultimately the consumers, i.e., the population. Based on the data presented, there is no clear evidence

that the reorganisation of the local government system has improved the quality of services. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the changes in the autonomy of the local government system, and how it was reduced, did not strengthen but instead weakened the role of community consumers.

In terms of the extent and depth of the transformation, indeed, the autonomy of local governments will not strengthen in the short to medium term, nor will their tasks and competences expand significantly, meaning they will remain heavily dependent on government resources and political connections. This statement remains true even if we are aware that there are significant differences between counties and municipalities in terms of living conditions and the standard of public services, which distinguishes the powers of local authorities and the level of satisfaction among the population. This is also clear from the longitudinal data presented in this study. The data suggest that, in the long term, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with local living conditions, as well as the degree of vulnerability, may influence trust in or the credibility of local governments, or at least significantly differentiate them. Thus, based on the data, the powers of local governments, their degree of autonomy, and satisfaction with public services are likely to change in a positive direction.

An interesting dichotomy emerges from the responses to the legislative changes. When respondents are asked to assess changes in the quality of local services in their municipality, their opinion remains unchanged for all services. In practice, regulatory changes that significantly altered the backdrop of local public services did not have a lasting impact on the services used by the population or their perception of how they functioned.

This may raise the question of whether people are satisfied with the quality of public services or whether they accept that this is the maximum quality that can be achieved given the available resources. Unfortunately, the survey data do not provide a clear answer to this question. Still, it is thought-provoking to consider how respondents evaluate individual services in terms of accessibility and quality.

The real question is instead whether the role of local governments is shifting from providing public services to organising and representing local communities, which could counterbalance the government and the political system, which strives for strong hegemony. Trust does not relate to local government's service capacity, but rather to its symbolic role in representing interests and organising the community. In a highly centralised system where powers are taken away from the local level, the value of local government can be enhanced as the "local voice," the embodiment of local identity, and the last easily accessible forum against central power. Citizens turn to the mayor even with matters that no longer fall within his or her remit because they regard him or her as the legitimate representative of the local community. Trust, therefore, means belief in this representative and symbolic role, while pragmatic expectations regarding services have already been transferred to the state.

The research was also helpful from a methodological perspective, as the method used confirmed that other methods may also be suitable for detecting changes in public opinion.

The methodological change between the two data collections, namely the use of online data collection, provided a better quality and more cost-effective solution for the questionnaire than telephone or face-to-face interviews. The technologies used to deliver the online questionnaires ensure that the three most essential representativeness criteria (gender, age, place of residence) are met. Moreover, these data are more reliable as they are based on information provided by the users themselves, albeit in the knowledge that their network of acquaintances can see it, this means that the chance of incorrect or misleading data is minimal, and the mathematical characteristics of random sampling ensure that an entirely random, representative sample can be created during online surveys.

Since online research conducted in this way complies with all the rules of random and representative sampling, and the questioning technique does not differ significantly from the way respondents answer questionnaire questions in person or online, the data sets from an online questionnaire survey are comparable with those from any previous personal or telephone data collection.

7 Conclusion

Centralisation, i.e., the merging of powers and competencies within central government, significantly impacts public services. While its basic aim is to harmonise policies and resource allocation, its effects are manifold, affecting efficiency, equity, accountability and innovation, and consumer satisfaction. The impact of centralisation on public services may even represent a balance of trade-offs by promoting efficiency, equity and a coherent crisis response on the one hand but also risk stifling bureaucratic inertia, politicisation and innovation on the other. Ultimately, the aim should be a nuanced approach that exploits the strengths of centralisation while mitigating its limitations and promoting public services that are both equitable and dynamic.

Following the change of government in 2010, central government power in Hungary was significantly strengthened, resulting in a shift from decentralisation to centralisation. The Local Government Act, adopted in 2011, brought significant changes to the structure of local public services and the responsibilities of local governments, significantly modifying the decentralisation experiment that had been developed after 1990 and replacing it with a strongly centralised approach. As I demonstrated in the study, the scope of local governments' mandatory tasks has been significantly reduced in areas such as energy supply, water supply, waste management, roads, and local public transport, where state contributions have become dominant, replacing local government responsibilities. Except for nursery care, the entire public education system was removed from the sphere of local government, which led to the gradual decline of primary and secondary education that

had previously flourished in small and medium-sized towns. Similar processes occurred around local cultural services, where the maintenance of museums and public libraries was transferred from counties to municipalities. Although this study focuses on the Hungarian case, its findings can be used to draw broader conclusions about understanding the relationship between the state and society in the context of democratic decline or hybrid regimes. The process of centralising public services, as described in detail here, is one of the most important tools of political control governments use to weaken alternative centres of power.

At the same time, the survey results highlighted one of the drawbacks of centralising public services, mainly due to a lack of attention to local needs. The results suggest that people prefer accessibility and proximity when choosing a service provider, regardless of whether the service is provided by the local government or the state (Kákai and Pálné, 2023). The distribution of opinions suggests that it is no exaggeration to say that, in a sense, local governments, rather than providing services, represent 'value' for the population simply by their existence. The "pragmatic duality" observed and analysed in the data — where citizens continue to favour local autonomy at the normative level while pragmatically adapting to centralised reality — is likely a common public reaction in similar political systems. Hungary, therefore, serves as an essential case study for researchers investigating how citizens interpret the shrinking local political space, and my study may provide a starting point for future research in other countries undergoing similar transformations.

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