



**Political Science
Doctoral Program**

SUMMARY

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Empirical analysis of the Hungarian local government system's autonomy

Ph.D. dissertation

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I. The subject of the dissertation

As a result of the transition in 1990, a decentralized local government system was introduced to Hungary. The cornerstone of the reforms was the re-establishment of the fully autonomous and elected local governments according to the principle of ‘one municipality – one local government’. In the constitutional/legal framework of the local government system as well as during the debates about it, the local autonomy was an emphasized value and it has never been questioned openly by any government or political fraction since 1990. While the formation of this framework did not bring about an effective functioning, the principle of autonomy often hindered the rationalization of the system. Every time the central state (and the governing parties) tried to transform the functioning of the administration or the public services, the opposition condemned this as an offence to the autonomy of the local governments. Without a two-third majority in the parliament, the governments were unable to carry out a comprehensive reform of the local government system, and the amendments to the sectoral rules could not mend the structural problems. Thus, the framework of the local government system was more or less intact in the first 20 years of the Hungarian democracy.

This status quo changed in 2010 with the Fidesz-KDNP’s general election landslide victory. The government used its supermajority to carry out a radical reform of the political system – including the local governments. The reform between 2010 and 2014 fundamentally changed the political and functional (service-providing, financial status etc.) framework of the sub-national levels. The reform did not affect the formal autonomy of the local governments, yet, one can argue that, in practice, the local governments’ room to manoeuvre shrunk..

In the Hungarian literature, the reform was reviewed and discussed relatively extensively; several papers focused on the description of the formal-legal changes and drew conclusions on the (probable) functioning of the new framework. In my dissertation, although I am also focusing on the formal changes of the local government in Hungary, I attempt to offer an empirical analysis of the changes in question. The research question of the study concerns the extent and levels in the changes of the local government system’s autonomy in Hungary? I argue that the concept of autonomy is suitable to grasp the essence of the changes, since it includes the formal rules of the institutional framework, the practical functioning of the system, and even the relations between the actors of the institution.

The aim of the dissertation is to analyse the sub-national (local and regional) sphere of the Hungarian political system with the tools of the latest researches in the field of local government. In the study, I apply the methods and findings of three international projects (in

which I was participated) and I complete them with the findings of my own research projects and data collection. The international research frameworks elaborated to analyse the local governments in a comparative manner, are suitable to overview the autonomy of the Hungarian system as they adopt a detached perspective to grasp the general picture and they are not lost in the details (which can be a problem of a research that uses an “inner” perspective solely).

The comparative research projects also places the changes of Hungarian local government in an international framework. However, beside top-down perspective of the quantitative approaches, I aim to explore the uniqueness of the system too therefore, I use qualitative methods, which use a bottom-up perspective to analyse the local governments.

In the theoretical chapter of the dissertation, I examine the concept of autonomy more extensively and I identify its aspects that can be translated into empirically analysable variables.

Based on Page and Goldsmith (1987), these aspects are:

- institutional settings (constitution and legal acts)
- tasks of the local government
- discretionary decision making capacity concerning these tasks
- financial sources to provide public services
- the ability of the local government to influence the upper levels.

Based on the literature, my starting point is the institutional framework (configured by the formal rules) but I also investigate the local governments’ practical room to manoeuvre (in public service-providing and fiscal autonomy). Furthermore, I examine the actors of the institution, because the relation of the local and national politics is manifested not only in the institution of the local government and its functioning, but in the *political autonomy* of the local (and regional) level. One of the simplest way to evaluate the political autonomy is to examine whether the local interest can prevail or the local political arena is merely following the logic of the national politics. If the local level mirrors the national politics and the local decisions are based on the national political relations, then even a highly autonomous institutional setting can result in a restricted practical functioning.

Therefore, I use a *new institutionalist* research approach in the dissertation, which rejects a dry, descriptive study of legal competences and formal powers (Sweeting 2008: 1). Beyond the formal rules, this approach emphasizes the role of the informal functional practices as it analyses the power relations of the actors in the system, and it studies not only the impact of institutions on behaviour but also the interaction between individuals and institutions (Lowndes 2001: 1953). According to the new institutionalist approach, the behaviour of the individuals is influenced both by the formal and informal rules, which are the results of the practical

functioning of the institution. Therefore, the functioning of the local government system is determined not only by the institutional settings but even by the actors of the institution (Heinelt 2010: 32).

II. Methods

The aim of the dissertation is to offer a complex analysis of a research topic. To be able to examine every aspects of the topic, I apply the mixed methods research paradigm, which combines the elements of the quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The mixed methods research uses the positive attributes of both approaches: the focus of the quantitative approach and the ability of the qualitative approach to examine extensively one topic (Király et al 2014: 96). The research method attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (Johnson et al 2007: 113).

The empirical research contains three levels of the analysis. First, I study the local government system from a quantitative perspective. My starting point is the institutional setting, but my quantitative analysis is more than a description of the formal rules of the institutional framework. It examines the effective autonomy of the local government, and the indexes I use to measure the level of the autonomy are composed of indicators that describe the practical functioning of the system too. The second level of analysis is about the organizations (national and local parties, civil organizations) of local and regional politics. On this level, I use quantitative approach: I analyse election results and results from surveys. The third level of analysis is focusing on the individuals from a qualitative perspective: with semi-structured interviews, I try to map the relations of the local actors.

II.1. The institutional level of local autonomy

To be able to measure the extent of the autonomy of the Hungarian local government (and thereby the effects of the local government reforms) I need a measure which can seize the institutional aspect (i.e. the place of the local governments inside the political system) and can also describe the practical functioning. This measure needs to grasp the factors of the local autonomy and decentralization shown through the work of Page and Goldsmith (1987): the institutional-constitutional setting, the scope of service-providing, the autonomy in performing tasks and the financial independency. If the autonomy is interpreted as the composition of these dimensions then an index can be created from these components.

I use the complex Regional Authority Index (RAI) in my work to grab those dimensions. It examines the level and change of autonomy of intermediate-level local governments of 42 democracies in a sixty year interval (1950-2010). The purpose of the research is to determine the real level of authority of the regional local governments; not just to measure the autonomy

resulting from the institutional embeddedness but primarily to determine the real range of opportunities with financial assets. The RAI was based on an often-used idea in the academic literature of decentralization: the duality of the “self-rule” and “shared-rule”. The first one shows how independently a regional local government can implement decisions on its own territory; the second one shows how much effect the local government can have on central decision making. The research assigns five indicators to both aspects, reflecting on the institutional situation and the actual operational environment as well.

I use the Local Authority Index (LAI) in my work to measure the autonomy of the local level. The LAI methodology was created for regional local governments and its purpose is to measure the extent and level of the autonomy of local governments (Ladner et al 2016). The extent of autonomy of local governments was examined in the research in 39 countries between 1990 and 2014. Hungary was part of both of the RAI and LAI projects; I personally did the coding for the LAI with the guidance of Pawel Swianiewicz (University of Warsaw). The research tried to develop a more advanced and sophisticated measure from the regional index to account for the extent of local autonomy by differentiating between the formal and practical operations. The LAI lays more emphasis on the financial opportunities of local governments; thereby the research uses eight “self-rule” and three “shared-rule” type indicators to measure the level of autonomy.

I argue in my thesis that LAI and RAI (and their components and the indicators of the autonomy aspects) are able to describe the institutional level of the local government autonomy and to show the opportunities and boundaries of the local government (practical) operation.

II.2. The organizational level of autonomy – local and national parties

The second level of the empirical analysis focuses on the organizations of the local and regional levels, that is, parties and civic organizations. Although the dominant trend in Hungarian political science is to examine the organizations from a top-down perspective, I review three studies (Soós 2008, 2015; Tóth 2013), which are focusing on the development of the local politics from a quantitative approach. These researches compare the election results (and the mandate shares) with the socio-demographic attributes of the municipalities (size, ethnic composition etc.) and using regression models, they try to answer the question: on what depends the participation of the national parties in local politics?

Whereas the local level of Hungarian politics is somewhat researched, I aim to add new results to the empirical analysis of the middle level as this field is neglected in the Hungarian academic

literature. I argue in my study that the regional (county level) politics in Hungary is closely related to the local politics through the participating organizations. Thus, a deeper understanding of the regional politics can help interpreting the organizational aspects of the local politics. The main focus in case of the county level politics is also on election results. As the first step of my analysis, I examine the institutional framework (rules of elections) to focus on the effect of its changes on institutional system. The institutional frameworks in Hungary changed fundamentally in 2010 (with the modifications in the election system) under which the middle level participants should operate. Based on candidate statistics, I demonstrate how fundamental effect a significant change in the election system can have on the middle level politics and how the relations of country level and regional level (as shown later in the study, in fact local) parties can change as a result of that.

In the next step, I analyse the processes of the middle level Hungarian politics through studying election results, and using the research frameworks and concepts to describe changes (nationalization and regionalization) of an international project (Schakel 2017). The project presented in my study explores the dynamics of the regional political arena in the Central and Eastern European countries in a comparative way. I have worked on the analysis of the Hungarian regional level together with Réka Várnagy. The initial question of the research is how the regional political events in the examined countries fit to the assumptions of the literature of the second order elections. If the regional elections suggest the signs of second order elections, then the nationalization of the middle level politics can be recognized because the voters use their vote to express their opinion about the winner party of the parliamentary elections. The regionalization process can be witnessed when the regional electoral race is not determined by the logic of the country level politics and the regional parties can successfully take part in the middle level elections.

The research used the “dissimilarity index” to measure the volatility of the vote ratios, which is similar to the voter volatility index of Pedersen (1979) but instead of measuring the change of the electoral performance (vote ratio) of the political organizations with a comparison of two parliamentary elections, it compares the results of the parliamentary and the regional elections. Therefore, this methodology can be used to examine the organizational participants on the middle level. As the research covers the whole temporal horizon of the Hungarian local governments from the first county level local government elections to 2014, it is able to capture the change in the situation of the institutional system and the participants through the two possible processes, nationalization and regionalization.

II.3. The Individual level of local autonomy – horizontal relations

The third level of the empirical analysis focuses on the individual actors of local politics. As a first step, I investigate the horizontal relations of the local level. The starting point is the institutional setting, and I introduce the relations based on the formal rules to examine the practical operation of the institutional framework with quantitative and qualitative research approaches – I use results of survey researches that were carried out with my participation.

The second step of the analysis concerning the local actors attempts to grasp the change through the perceptions of the local actors. First, I introduce the results of a research based on qualitative interviews carried out between 2013 January and April. In the project, we asked majors and clerks about their impressions and first experiences of the local government reforms. Second, I use the results of an international research project, Political Leaders in European Cities – POLLEADER, in which I participated as a member of the Hungarian research team. I analyse how the local government reform after 2010 transformed the relations of the local actors. Since the data collection was implemented in two waves (2003 and 2015, before and after the reform), the data is suitable to grasp the changes. By focusing on the role of the mayor, I attempt to answer the question whether the changes in the institutional settings transformed the perceptions of the mayors as well. I argue that this approach proves to be useful, because the mayors are those actors who can simultaneously detect the changes of the local government's position in the vertical relations and the changes of the local horizontal relations.

In sum, I empirically analyse the practical functioning of the institution at three levels (institution, organizations and individuals) with the approach of the mixed methods research. The aim of the study is to show how the formal institutional framework operates practically in interaction with the organizational and individual actors and how the changes of the institution affect the actors of the local and regional levels.

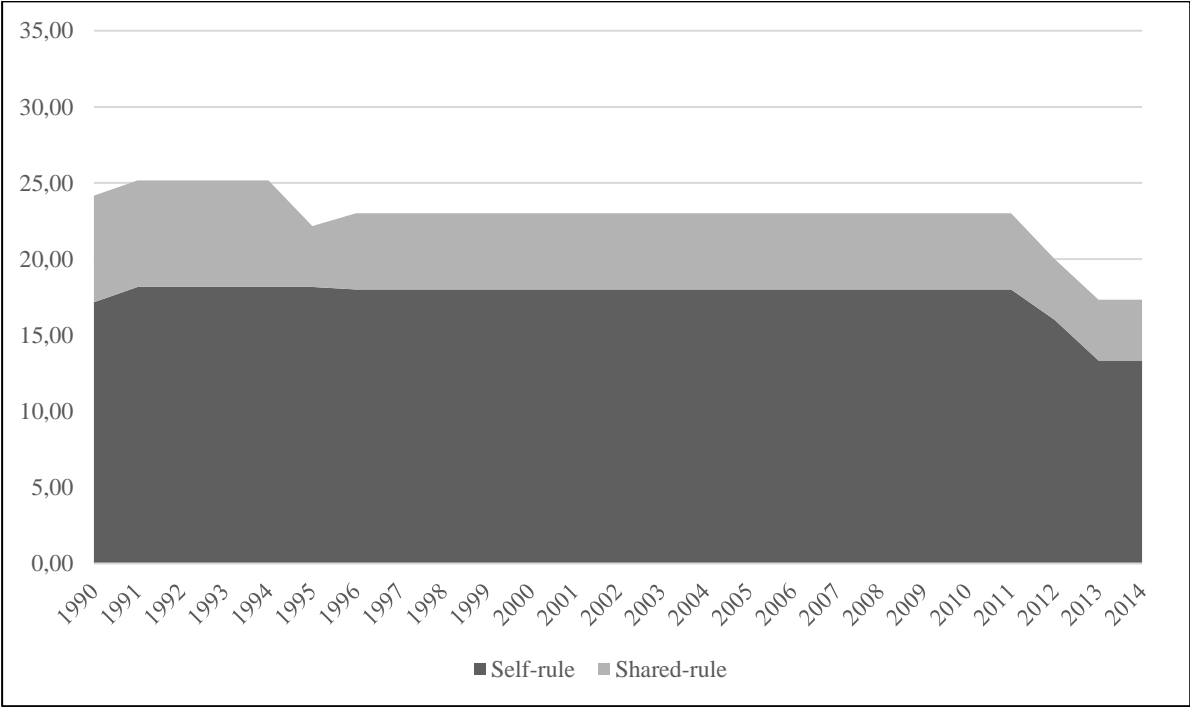
III. Main findings

III.1. The institutional level of local autonomy

On the first level of the empirical analysis, I use indexes that which, based on the literature, are suitable to quantify different aspects of the autonomy. In the following, I introduce the findings of the more sophisticated LAI, which focuses on the local level.

If we add the values of the indicators of the two dimensions of the index (self-rule and shared-rule), we can see where the Hungarian local autonomy between the two theoretical endpoints, the zero autonomy (0) and the fully autonomous local governments (37) can be found. Based on this research framework, the Hungarian system was fairly autonomous in 1990, with lots of discretion to provide services and with moderate room to manoeuvre on the fields of policy scope and fiscal autonomy (Figure1).

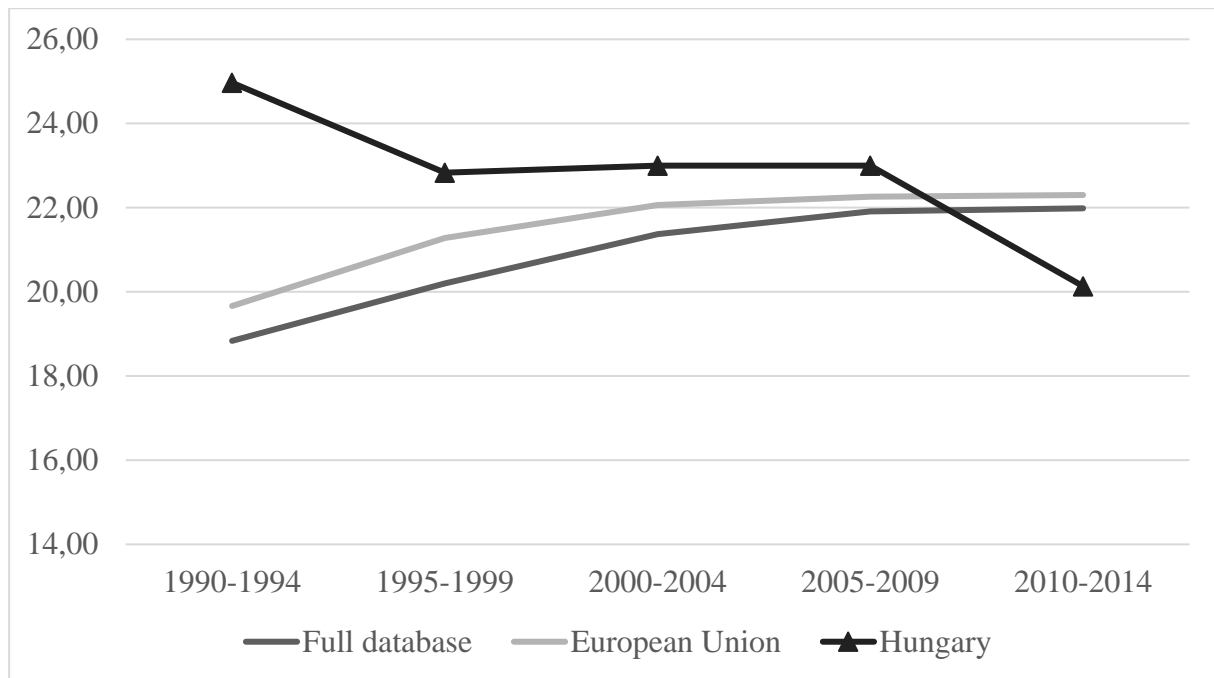
Figure 1: *Autonomy of the Hungarian local government based on LAI (1990-2014)*



Concerning the temporal variation, the starting autonomy of the system changed two times, and it was a reduction on both occasions. The more significant change occurred between 2011 and 2013, as a result of the drop in many indicator values. The reform affected the local government’s formal and effective room to manoeuvre in numerous *policy areas* (healthcare, education, social assistance), its *fiscal capacity* (with the activity-based financing and the new,

more rigorous conditions of issuing bonds and taking out credit), and its *decision making freedom* (through the effective legal control from the central government). As a result of these changes, the extent of the local autonomy decreased from 23 to 17.3.

Figure 2: *Local autonomy of Hungary in international comparison (1990-2014)*



The data in the dissertation shows that, at the time of the transition, Hungarian local governments had a fairly high autonomy according to an international comparison, and only seven countries had a higher autonomy value. Since then, the changes of the Hungarian local autonomy have been following a completely different path compared to the international trends. While in other countries the local autonomy gradually grew during the last 20-25 years, in Hungary, it decreased (Figure 2). In the last time interval, the extent of Hungarian local autonomy shrunk under the international average and only thirteen countries have smaller local autonomy (most of them are not EU countries, e.g. Albania, Georgia, Moldova or Turkey). If we review the path of the Hungarian local autonomy from 1990 to 2014, one can observe the biggest fall among the countries covered by the research project.

The indexes of the study demonstrated that to be able to examine the local autonomy, we have to consider the formal institutional rules, but it is not sufficient to account for all the changes: the example of Hungary showed that the formal institutional (constitutional/legal) framework did not change much, but the local governments' practical room to manoeuvre (fiscal autonomy and service-providing competences) reduced considerably after 2010, following the reforms

that altered the functioning of the whole system. The indexes mirror the Hungarian literature's standpoint on the reforms: there was no significant change formally, but the autonomy of the local government fell back in the aspects of practical functioning and fiscal authority.

The quantitative analysis also showed, why the new institutionalist approach is reasonable: although the indexes are suitable to measure many aspects of the autonomy, this approach can not grasp the "political", which lies beyond the formal institutional settings and is rooted in the informal rules and can be examined through the relations and behaviours of the actors in the system. In the dissertation, I argue that the local autonomy is more than the autonomy of the local government as an institution, it also includes the political autonomy of the actors (organizations and individuals). Therefore, the next two levels of the analysis focuses on these actors.

III.2. The organizational level of autonomy – local and national parties

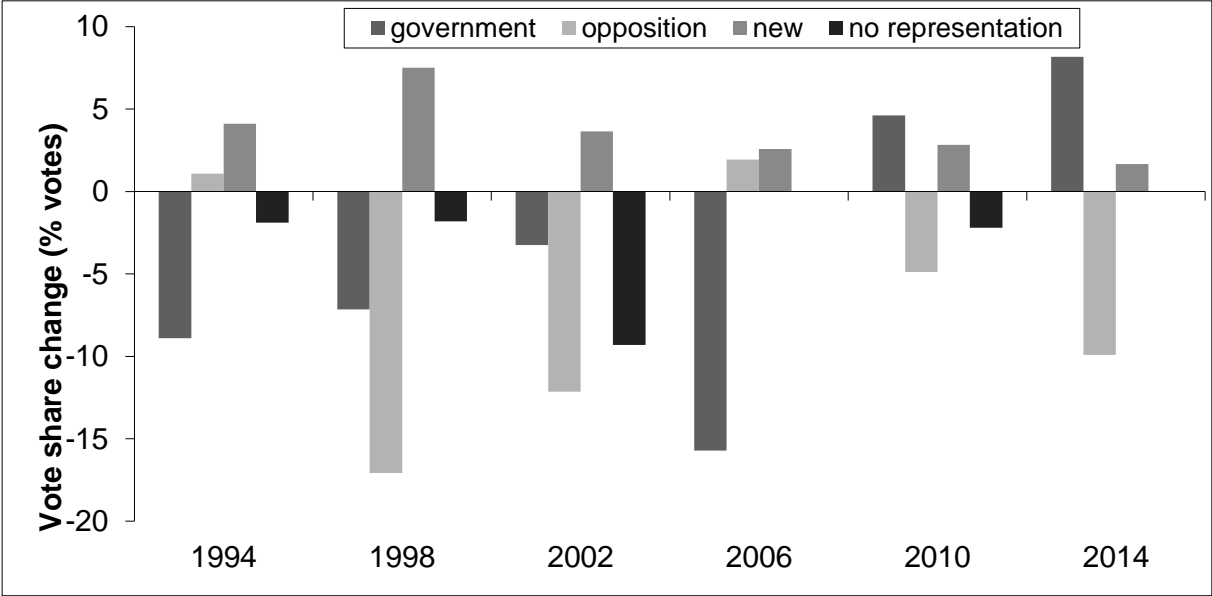
Through the second level of the analysis of the organizational actors I attempt to answer the question whether the top-down or the bottom-up processes are dominant on the sub-national levels. In the absence of qualitative research data, I use election results to investigate the patterns of the dynamics between the local and national politics.

The empirical analysis confirms the basic assumption of the Hungarian literature that the differentiation of the municipalities in the electoral system based on their population brings about different local politics. In the smaller communities, the independent politicians and the local parties (which are referred in the Hungarian literature as civic organizations) are the dominant actors, while the national parties rule the local governments of municipalities with bigger population. It seems that the branches of the national parties can not (or do not want to) be established in smaller local governments while the logic of national politics determines local politics of the bigger communities. These are, of course, not new findings. The dissertation wants to add new results to the scientific discourse with the approach that examines the two opposite (top-down and bottom-up) processes on the Hungarian middle level ("megye"). The examination of the middle level helps to understand the dynamics of the whole sub-national organizational sphere, because the factors I introduce in the dissertation (e.g. the institutional settings that hinder the establishment of the regional parties, the timing of the local and middle level elections, the absence of regional identity etc.) create a favourable situation to the local parties to participate in the regional politics.

Regarding the “second order elections” hypothesis, the data shows mixed findings with regard to the Hungarian case: the turnout is lower than in the case of national elections, but the governing forces do not lose votes systematically between the national and regional elections (Figure 3). The timing of the elections might be the key to account for this. In the time period (1990-2014) examined the regional elections followed the national elections more or less within six months, which is a seriously limited time for the voters to turn away from the governing parties and give a protest vote on the elections (unless something extraordinary happens, like in 2006).

However, the general picture is that the top-down process (nationalization) is the dominant trend in Hungary, as the national parties are more and more dominant on the middle level and the institutional changes and the national political parties strategies in alliance-forming result the fall back of the bottom-up type initiations. With this trend, the Hungarian case fits into the Central-Eastern European region, where other countries also show the signs of nationalization: the second order effects prevail as the voters, the parties, the politicians and the media consider the regional elections as a next round of the national elections with lower stakes (Schakel – Dandoy 2017: 17).

Figure 3: *Vote share changes by party types*



Obviously, the analysis based on the election results is not able to cover the topic of political autonomy fully; it would be necessary to carry out a qualitative research on the organization of the parties. In the absence of that, one can only make assumptions about the organizational autonomy – however, these assumptions are at least partly supported by the qualitative research results of the individual level. After 2010, the data shows the intensification of the ongoing

trends, that is, the national parties took control of the local governments except for the smallest communities (Pálné 2008: 242) while the local political functioning mirrors the logic of the national politics. Thus, the local politics is about the parties, which presumably means centralization in the given political situation.¹

III.3. The individual level of local autonomy – horizontal relations

The third level of empirical analysis uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relations of the actors. The first finding of the study concerning the horizontal relations of the local individuals is that the different individual attributes matter as the power relations can vary between the municipalities based on the local circumstances.

The mayors position in the local politics is highly significant, but even the deputy mayor can play an important role. The importance of the clerk declined following the reform as the loyalty to the mayor became one of the key factor in the work of her/him (after 2011, the mayor became the formal employer of the clerk).

Based on the empirical researches, the reform after 2010 brought changes in two aspects. First, in the given political situation (with the Fidesz-KDNP's dominance in the councils) the decision making is transferred from the council to the party fraction, the real decision maker became the party while the council only ratifies the decisions formally. Second, based on the interviews and the surveys, the position of the mayor strengthened even more. According to the second wave of the POLLEADER survey, the mayors think that the local bureaucrats should stick to politically defined goals and that politicians can not only define the objectives and control outputs, but they can intervene more into the task fulfilment of local administration. Thus, politics and administration came closer to each other between the two waves of the survey, the politics (and the mayor) influences the administration's operation more. The mayor was able to strengthen its position comparing to the other local actors too. However, the examination of the vertical relations shows that actors of the national politics were able to gain influence in the shaping of the local politics (Table 1).

The survey-based international project is suitable to examine the *similarities*. It highlights that the institutional changes affect the perceptions of the mayor who is the key actor of the local

¹ The Fidesz's political organization is highly centralized (Horváth and Soós 2015: 275; Balázs and Hajdú 2017: 95) and the central party leadership influences the operation of the local party branches.

level and clearly recognizes her/his increasing dominance among the local actors, while faces the increasing dominance of the national politics on local level.

Table 1: *Horizontal and vertical relations of the actors and the levels*

	1. wave (2003)	2. wave (2015)
Local level – national level (vertical relations)	3.2	4.6
Mayor – council/assembly (horizontal relations)	3.23	3.25

Question: how would you characterize the changes in influence that have occurred in the last decade among the main actors in local affairs?

Data: „Political Leaders in European Cities” (POLLEADER) survey first and second waves.

The qualitative, bottom-up perspective of the empirical analysis shows one more interesting result: local autonomy depends highly on the specific, complex (socio-economic) position of the municipalities. Based on the capabilities of the communities, different levels of autonomy can evolve in the same formal institutional setting. Local governments with a larger room to manoeuvre have greater extent of autonomy, which, in the Hungarian case, is primarily influenced by the financial situation (a result following from the qualitative analysis). Thus, one can observe real autonomy (which is defined by the power of immunity and power of initiation in the literature) if the formal and political autonomy is coupled with fiscal authority, if the central government ensures not only tasks but financial capacity to provide services and there are institutional, political and financial guarantees of independent operations.

Based on all that, the concept of autonomy is not that “static” as the macro-variables (the authority indexes) describe, but highly depends on the specific attributes of the municipalities, first and foremost on their level of economic development. One of the main lesson regarding the applicability of the indexes is that a more sophisticated approach is more suitable, which can differentiate between the local governments based on their attributes (size, socio-economic status etc.).

In sum, in the dissertation I attempt to add new results to the scientific discourse about the Hungarian local government autonomy. I argue, that the *approach of the study* needs to be a new institutionalist one to be able to grasp not only the autonomy based on the formal institutional rules but the autonomy of the practical operation, which is established by the

organizational and individual actors. Thus, from a *conceptual standpoint*, the autonomy needs to be defined as a “broad” concept, which contains not only the formal (institutional) autonomy, the authority of service-providing and the fiscal autonomy of the local government, but the political autonomy of the system and its actors both. To be able to carry out a complex examination of the local autonomy, one needs to adopt a multiple perspective, which presumes a mixed, quantitative and qualitative *methodological* approach. Finally, regarding the results of the *Hungarian case*, one can observe the declining importance of the local government in the political system after 2010. However, fundamentally, the status of the municipalities did not change because of the modification of the formal institutional rules, but as a result of the interaction between the actors and the formal framework which, in the end, considerably shrunk the local governments’ room to manoeuvre in practical functioning (service-providing, fiscal situation and political functioning).

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